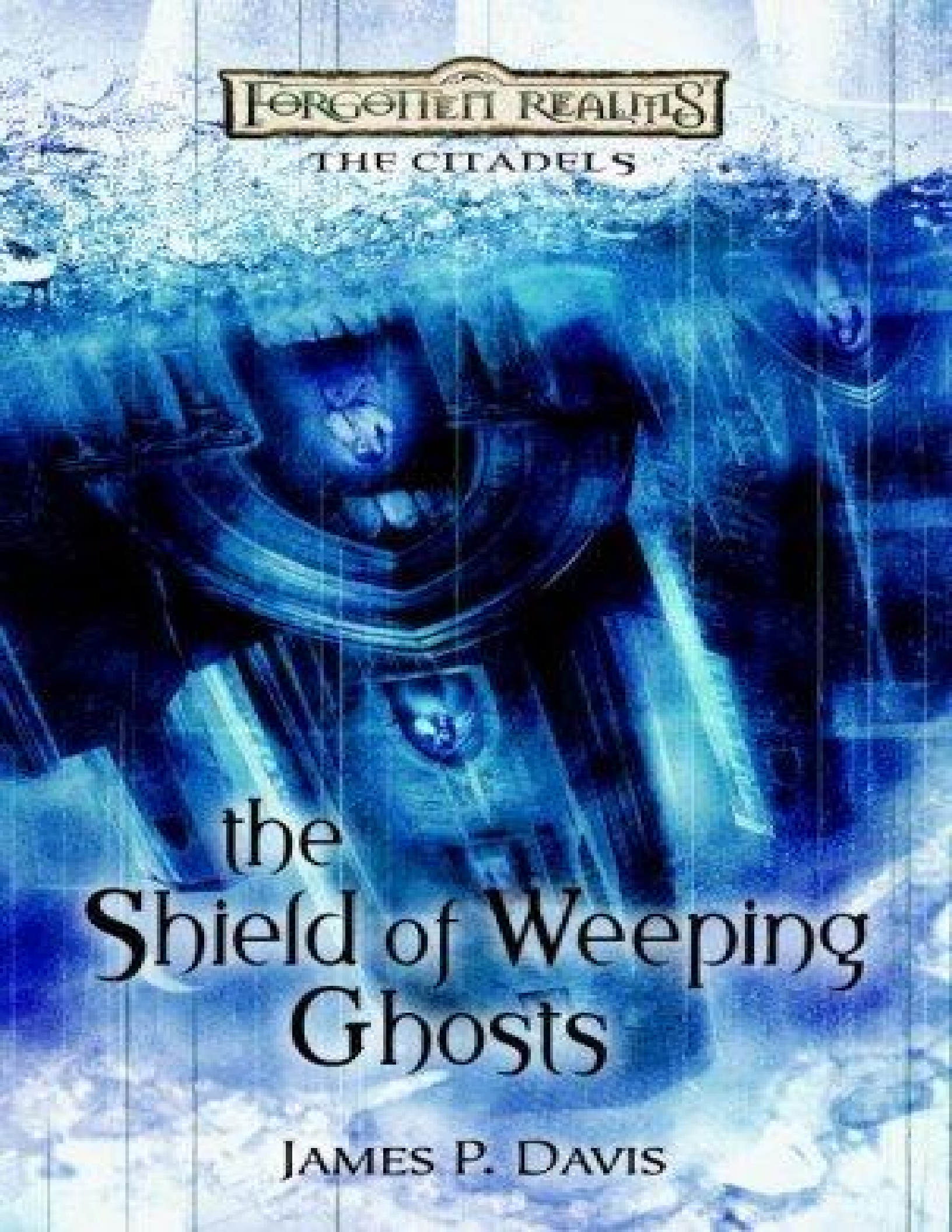
FORGOTTEN REALMS

THE CITADELS



the Shield of Weeping Ghosts

JAMES P. DAVIS

Forgotten Realms
The Citadels: The Shield of Weeping Ghosts
By James P. Davis

I had a dream, which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguished, and the stars Did wander darkling in the eternal space, Rayless, pathless, and the icy earth Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air; Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread Of this their desolation; and all hearts Were chilled into a selfish prayer for light...

—Lord Byron (I788-I824)

Prologue

-946DR

The Kingdom of Ashanath

Winter winds moaned across the plain as the children trudged along the well-worn road. Broken spears and abandoned siege engines jutted from the white field, a dead forest of sticks and bones. Small, bare feet pressed shallow prints into the frozen mud. Hollow, haunted eyes stared at the path ahead, rolling as thirst and hunger gnawed at empty stomachs. Chains rattled at their wrists, manacles digging into their tender flesh and dragging little trails alongside their footprints, as the children pushed on toward Shandaular.

The old road had been quiet for several tendays, disturbed only by bold scavengers and the first snows of winter. The children had no one to call out to, no caravan or even brigand to witness their journey. The oldest of them was thirteen, her long dark hair once well-kept and smooth, now tangled and dirty. The youngest was almost seven, and she was the first to spot the high walls ahead, the pale light of dawn rising behind them. She lifted a trembling hand and sobbed quietly as they came into view.

She pulled at the chains, running faster than the others despite her size. The other children wheezed through lips a

bruised shade of blue as they struggled to keep up. Seeing the
tall gates and small figures patrolling the city's perimeter, the youngest girl glanced nervously over her shoulder. Somewhere beyond the western horizon, in deep shadows that stabbed her with fear, she imagined their pursuers gaining with each passing breath. As if sensing her anxiety, her six companions picked up their pace as they shambled ever quicker through the new fallen snow.

Soldiers' voices called out from the walls, breaking the grim silence of the field beyond the city gates. Startled carrion birds took wing, disturbed by the sudden activity and voicing their displeasure as they left their rotting meals. The gates swung open slowly, pushing drifts of snow ahead of them as several soldiers ran out to meet the children with blankets in hand.

The youngest tried to smile, her face stiff and aching, tracks of frosted tears cracking on her cheeks. She could see the horror in the soldiers' eyes, hear their whispered oaths to merciful gods. The soldiers wrapped a blanket around the youngest girl's shoulders, and spoke soothing words in her ear as they lifted her in their strong arms. The chains stretched taut, connecting her to the other children, and more soldiers were summoned to carry the strangers she had traveled so far with.

She looked back over the man's shoulder. The western horizon shimmered with darkness as if a black sun heralded an unnatural dawn to mirror the east. The monsters hid in the dying night, beneath fading stars. The chains began to squirm on her skin. Soothing voices died away, overtaken by a sibilant whispering that tingled painfully in her mind.

She shivered as the pain grew and tears welled in her eyes. The gates loomed high, their shadow falling over the children who began to shake and weep in unison. One cried out, falling from his rescuer's arms, dragging the others low as the chains pulled tight. The chains glittered, tiny runes

etched on the links flaring to life, matching those burned into skin, on the napes of their necks and down their spines.
Waves of rolling heat flowed from the chains and melted the snow. The soldiers fell back, mouths agape as the first fallen boy convulsed, his eyes blazing with sudden light. The young girl swooned, eyes fixed on the west, imagining the cruel standard that chased them: the dead tree stripped of leaves on a crimson field. A warm breeze caressed her skin as power erupted around her.
Wood splintered and stone shattered, flames poured outward destroying all that they touched. The children sat unharmed at the epicenter, dazed as the magic forced upon them spoke itself. Plumes of smoke rose into the predawn sky, charred forms crashed back down to earth, steaming in the snow as the children stood on aching legs. The chains, writhing and whispering, pulled them beyond the gates and into Shandaular.
The snow blackened and hissed like acid poured on the ground as they passed. More soldiers came, but they fell back screaming as the aura of magic touched them. Others shouted orders, and some blew horns, notes of alarm echoing across the city.
The young girl fell under a shadow and looked up at the tall northwest tower of the fortress within the wall. Her breath came quickly and she did not understand what was happening. The skin of her arms crawled as if something moved beneath her flesh. She led the others on, recognizing the northwest tower somehow, unsure of her memory. Small faces pressed through the children's skin. Little horns and needle-fangs responded to the call of magic in the chains; clawed hands pushed for escape.
Blurry figures ran screaming from small homes, following the shouts of soldiers. Smoke drifted through the streets. The flames spread despite all attempts to quell them. Soldiers ran to the broken outer wall as the sound of beating drums thundered from the west.

The young girl tried to walk faster, fearful of the dread army that followed. She scratched at her arms, digging deep and sobbing as chaos erupted in the city streets. The northwest tower looked down upon her and her shambling companions as they neared the main gates. She stared at the massive entrance, closed and unusually quiet.

The other children shuddered to a stop, the whispering chains growing louder.

More explosions and spiraling coils of smoke heralded the clash of the attacking army and Shandaular's defenders. Arrows clattered on cobblestone streets, raining from the sky, carrying pitch and flames.

The old wood of the castle gates bore the symbol of a stylized archway within the shape of a tall shield. The young girl struggled to understand, memory trying to assert itself past the pain that rippled through her body. She had returned here, though nothing remained of why she had been taken away. One of the boys fell to his knees, roaring in a voice that was not his own. She reached out, skin boiling, her fingers brushing against the gate as she recalled its name.

"The... Shield!" she croaked, her throat raw as power surged through the chains and used her voice to scream.

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The Shield stood as mute witness to the fall of Shandaular.

Flames rose so high that they appeared to burn the sky. Crowds of frightened people ran toward the city's center as a single mass, screaming and clutching at one another. Prayers drifted on the air alongside ash and smoke. And children, bound in chains, shattered the fortress gates with foul magic, demons bursting through their skin as they marched into the silent courtyard.

Mostly empty halls awaited them. Ice grew in the old cracks, frost spreading from corridor to corridor. Torches still burned, but only weakly, their light lessened in the odd gloom of the citadel's towers. Breezes stirred strange mists into streams

that flowed outward from the notthwest tower.
The children came first, their dazed eyes burning with smoke and the madness of pain. Their chains scraped along the stones of tall steps, their hands spreading shadows and corruption. Whispers and screams surrounded them; tears and blood stained the floors.
A powerful explosion rocked the city, shaking the outer walls and filling them with cracks. The invaders rode forward on horseback, slaughtering and razing as a tornado of flashing lights and smoke merged with the sky, rising from the city's center.
A man entered the gates, soldiers in his wake. Clad in armor, he stared with piercing blue eyes upon the fortress and its tall towers. The coat of arms on his cloak bore the crimson field and barren tree of Narfell, the conquering empire. Lips set in a cruel smile, he ascended the blackened steps and glanced once, casually, upon the ruin he had created.
History was carved into the stone walls by their battle, memory written in cracks, the encroaching ice, and the moaning shadows left in the children's footsteps. Blood soaked into the cold stones, swallowed by something that shouldn't have existed. The Shield did not recognize the passage of time, unable to comprehend the nuances between one moment and the next. The difference between what was and what is, it would never know—but because of one moment, one curse of fate, the Shield remembered.
They came at dawn to break the wall, by Seven
were they led. To frozen walls and to weary core, Seven cross'd
the plain,
To gates of Shandaular, of fallen kingdom, Seven came.
Shattered souls, bound in chains, by Nentyarch's
crown, the Seven came The army charged with chilling song the Seven at
their head,
By flame and fiend the path was forged, the end of

Shandaular.
In tears did they drown; Seven they were, weeping,
to the Shield. Within the walls, inside the halls; to break the bones, to shake the stones Of the Shield and steal its Breath.
Of the Shield and steal its Breath.
—excerpt from the Firedawn Cycle, canto X
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chapter one
Nightall, I376DR, Year of the Bent Blade
A night, the deep blue waters of Lake Ashane became a black mirror of stars and clouds. Sheets of thin ice floated here and there, cracking against the hull of the two-masted felucca as it sailed toward the western shore. The winter wind cut like a knife through all but the thickest cloaks, chilling bones and creating a crust of frost on the serpentlike bowsprit.
A scent of smoke drifted on the air, carried from bonfires still burning in the villages and cities of Rashemen. The fires burned once every year to mark the singing of the realm's memory, the Firedawn Cycle. The air hummed with the ancient tune, though the passengers of the ship were miles away from the solemn festivals and the voices of the wychlaren.
In fur cloaks, long swords, and thick hide armor, the Rashemi warriors sat stoically in the cold. Berserkers of the Ice Wolf Lodge, they emulated their totem spirit and would show nary a shiver to complain of any discomfort. Some manned sails and rigging, pacing the deck and warily eyeing the icy waters. In the stern sat their ethran, one of the wychlaren, for whom they would lay down their lives and obey to the strictest measure.
These warriors, thirty or so, sitting to starboard and port of the ship, were the heart of Rashemen. The wychlaren were its spirit.
The ethran sat high in the stern, her painted mask covered in symbols of magic, brown hair flowing in the wind. Only

her eyes were visible through the mask, and they shone like steel. She had spoken only once since they'd begun their journey and this to the helmsman to inquire as to the length of their voyage. Satisfied with his answer, she had been silent ever since, casting not one glance at the bow or the figure huddled in the curve behind the bowsprit.

No one looked at him. Instead they watched the waves and smelled the lake's scent frozen in the winter breeze. A few whispered quiet prayers and bit their thumbs, entreating the spirits of the lake to allow them safe passage, despite their ungrateful cargo. Faith was easy to come by in the world of the Rashemi; survival was another matter entirely. Each knew their prayer did not fall on deaf ears, but that in turn those who heard them were under no obligation to protect them. Swords were close at hand, armor was fitted tight, and eyes remained alert for any sign of movement.

Through his own mask Bastun watched and listened, observing how strange and foreign his own people had become to him. Behind the bowsprit, he sat in their presence yet so far away from them in mind and spirit he wondered if all his years had happened someplace else, some other country. Bastun's escorts to the lands beyond Rashemen were as full of rumors about him as if he'd become a myth, one of Rashemen's great beasts of legend. Absently, he traced the dark mask that covered his face, so similar to Thaena's and yet garnering a pale reflection of the respect an ethran was afforded. From forehead to jawline it covered his features, carved of a light but durable wood and inlaid with silver whorls and tiny designs resembling thorny vines. It marked him as a vremyonni, the title of all male wizards who chose to remain in Rashemen.

Enchantments in the mask enhanced his hearing, enough that he could detect the faintest intake of breath or the quietest whisper among the warriors. He observed them intently, for when he'd been younger he desired to become one of them. Tales abounded of the berserkers' strength and

ferocity. The wychlaren, too, were venerated in songs and epic poems, their magic forging the realm of Rashemen from the ashes of an ancient war. In all of the vaunted tales and stories, the vremyonni were a footnote—a wise sage here, a forged blade there, and rarely a name to remember or speak of. There would be no tale of Bastun to tell around a campfire on a cold night.

Children had no need to hear stories of treason or murderers. Leaning forward, Bastun regarded the staff across his lap, feeling the old wood and leather wrappings on its grip. Though spells and incantations had no true master, no real signatures, being forces of the Weave bound only by the will of the caster, Bastun swore he could sense the presence of his teacher in the grain and the knots.

A few of the warriors noticed the movement and tensed, their breathing interrupted. Bastun paused, smirking beneath his mask as they calmed and settled back into their seats along the rail. He did not care about the rumors they spread or what they believed, but if he could not gain their respect he would accept their fears and assumptions. Staring at the staff, feeling the old wood in his hands, the magic it held tingled beneath his fingertips.

Light thumps against the hull of the ship signaled another series of ice sheets slightly thicker and more tightly packed than the others. Thaena stood from her seat in the stern and looked out across the surface of the lake.

"All is well, helmsman?" she mumured.

"Yes, ethran," the man answered. "The ice will slow us some, but little else."

Bastun could hear the nervousness in Thaena's voice and see the determined focus in her eyes. It was unusual for an ethran to be put in charge of a fang, even on such a mission as this, but Thaena had always been ambitious. Even as a child,

sitting around the bonfires for the Firedawn Cycle, she had sworn that one day she too would be a hathran. Though the

othlors, the oldest and wisest of the wychlaren, truly ruled Rashemen, the hathrans were the face of that rule and the ethrans their dutiful students.

He could almost remember the face behind the mask, despite the years that separated the adults they had become from the children they once were.

While studying the ethran, Bastun noticed the warrior beside Thaena looking at him—Duras. Tall and lean, Duras had also been there in that village just south of the Ashenwood in the heart of Rashemen. He and Bastun had sworn that they would join the Ice Wolf Lodge together, blood brothers to defend their homeland and make great legends of their lives. Duras nodded and looked away, appearing uncomfortable. Bastun turned as well, peering over the rail toward the western shore, still not visible beyond the veil of mist and clouds that gathered there.

The wind strengthened and the sails strained as they rocked the felucca through waves that had grown choppy and splashed higher along the front of the hull. Bastun leaned back into the curving hollow behind the bow and pulled his cloak tighter, cradling his staff against his chest. Near the head of the staff, a curving section covered in runes and tipped with a sphere of heavy steel, Bastun traced the dark line of a scar in the wood.

Closing his eyes, he set the world aside, freeing himself to meditate and look to the future. It was an odd concept, the future. So much of his time lately had been wrapped up in the past. The recent past clung to him like shreds of heavy shadow, darkening his steps wherever he went. The far past, so long hidden in his soul, was rushing back to tap him on the shoulder and make him turn around. Though he marveled at the differences between then and now—the boy he had been and the man he'd become—he still could not help but feel

regret. Questions lingered there in the moments between the moments—questions he'd rather not ponder and

answers he felt he knew all too well.
Fatigue waited behind his eyelids and took away his worries into a half-sleep filled with dreams and memories, one merging with the other until the difference no longer mattered. The Firedawn Cycle was sung to him and his friends, the warmth of the bonfire glowed under the stars and possibilities spread from one end of the heavens to the other. The epic tales, the battles of Narfell and Raumathar, and the great wizards of legend, dark and terrible, appeared in the flames as the lyrics summoned them.
The army charged with chilling song, the Seven at their head,
By flame and fiend the path was forged, the end of Shandaular.
In tears did they drown; Seven they were, weeping,
to the Shield. Within the walls, inside the halls; to break the bones, to shake the stones Of the Shield and steal its Breath. Of the Shield and steal its Breath.
Bastun could see that first spark of ambition alighting in Thaena's eyes as she watched the hathran and the dancing flames. She was so beautiful to him. Duras and he took up sticks from the ground that instantly became swords of legend in the hands of mighty berserkers. The older warriors smiled and cheered them on, until the sticks broke and it became a wrestling match or some other test of strength. Duras was strong even then, but Bastun was quick and sly. Sitting near the fire, a broad smile on her face, was Bastun's mother, humming along to the tune of the Firedawn. Sleeping on her lap, up far later than her bedtime, was Ulsera, Bastun's younger sister.
The song faltered in his dream. Bastun stirred and opened his eyes, the image of his sister burned into his mind. He sat up, wondering how long he had slept. A heartbeat passed before he realized he could still hear the song.
Alarmed, he looked to the others. The helmsman had slumped at the wheel. The warriors' eyes were closed, but

their heads still swayed to the strange tune that filled the air. Thaena's head had drooped to her chest and Duras lay on his side, his face a grimace of anguish as if in the throes of a nightmare. The wind still held strong and ice thumped and cracked at the bow, but another sound had joined the others. Something scratched at the hull, like claws pulling at wood. Something that was not ice thumped at the boards beneath his feet, from under the ship.

Standing carefully and quietly, Bastun peered over the side, scanning the surface of the water for any movement other than the waves. As he did so the helmsman groaned and slid sharply to one side, turning the wheel along with his weight. The ship leaned into the turn, throwing Bastun off-balance but awakening Thaena. Regaining his footing, Bastun met the ethran's confused gaze and watched as she took in the scene. The music drifted in and around the masts and the felucca's passengers like an invisible serpent, its call still tempting Bastun's mind back to the dream. Awaiting him in that dream was Ulsera, staring back at him, and he knew he would not succumb to the insistent charm again.

Thaena stood and rushed to the helmsman, pulling him away from the wheel to lie upon the deck as she righted the ship. Bastun leaned on the railing, staring into the water as Thaena tied the wheel into place. That done she strode to him, staff in hand.

"What have you—" she began, but the scratching grew louder, the thumping on the hull more demanding.

Looking closer in the glow of a hooded lantern, Bastun saw the pale face of a beautiful woman just beneath the surface of the water. Her blood red lips mouthed the words of the song, a mockery of the Firedawn Cycle, as she reached toward him with bone white arms. Yellowed hair haloed her head, drifting with the waves. Other forms became visible, entwining themselves with the first, swimming under and around the felucca. Unclothed, they slid through the water like ghosts singing their beguiling dirge.

Thaena shook Duras awake, whispering a ward to release him from enchantment. He started and sat up. Before he could draw the long blade at his side, one of the warriors had turned and leaned over the starboard rail, reaching for the water spirits below.

"No!" Duras yelled. He grabbed the man's legs and hauled him back to the deck, but the warrior only struggled all the more to reach the singers. The sound of the cry and the struggle awoke more of the fang and they rushed to assist.

Thaena began to chant, brandishing her staff at the water. She called upon the power of the wychlaren, the ancient command of Rashemen's spirits to drive the fey away from their vessel. The warrior roused from his dream and pulled himself to the port rail, his face serene as he looked into the waves. Thaena finished her spell, flourishing the staff to end the mystical attack, but nothing happened. Her eyes widened and she stared at Bastun, a brief moment of vulnerability that spurred him to action.

White hands appeared at the port rail, caressing the face of their victim. The fey, a water spirit known as a rusalka, smiled and cooed as she dragged the man's shoulders further over the rail. Reaching into his robes, Bastun produced a small amulet which he gripped in his fist, willing the magic to come forth and answer his call. His hand flashed with light and a whip of crackling blue energy lashed out at the rusalka, scarring her shoulder and eliciting a shrill scream that burrowed in his ears. Her victim screamed as well, falling back and gripping the sides of his head.

Duras stood and drew his long sword. Those not caught in the song followed suit as more of the rusalka crawled up the side of the boat to grasp at their victims. Another man to starboard slipped past his would-be rescuers and leaned far over the railing. Those nearby caught his cloak and he strained against them, his hands splashing in the waves as white arms reached upward to accept him.

Bastun rushed to starboard, his amulet lashing into the lake

and sparking across the skin of the gathered water spirits. They screamed and pulled harder, both groups struggling to hang onto the thrashing warrior who reached for the singing maidens and batted at the hands that had found a grip on his shoulders. The continuous whip of magic slowly broke apart the rusalkas' deadly covey, scattering the fey away from the ship. The final few released their beguiled prey and sank back to the depths of the Ashane.

The man wailed as he was hauled back onboard, his mournful cries fading as his mind slowly returned to him, leaving him shivering and bewildered among his brothers in arms. Breathing heavily, Bastun backed away, his eyes still searching the waves for more of the spirits until he was sure they had gone. The amulet had dug into his palm, drawing a line of blood that dripped from his knuckles. Releasing his grip, he held his hand up and noticed several warriors staring at him, the old look in their eyes. Bastun sighed, about to return to his place at the bow when Thaena's voice stopped him.

"You have been forbidden to cast spells in this company, exile. Have you forgotten?"

Bastun tried to read her eyes behind the mask. Stunned by her accusation, he merely held up his hand and let the amulet swing on its silver chain for her to see.

"It is a mere tool, ethran. I have cast no spells."

Duras walked up from behind her, his sword still drawn and his eyes still watching the lake's surface. "Are they gone, Thaena?"

"Likely," she replied, her eyes on Bastun's amulet a moment longer before turning to the warrior, "though they should not have attacked in the first place."

At this last she angled her head, almost imperceptibly, at Bastun, before returning to her place at the stern. Though her words stung, Bastun couldn't help but see the beautiful young girl he had once known. Duras looked apologetic as he sheathed his blade. Bastun returned the amulet to within

his robes.
"She just doesn't understand, Bastun." Duras glanced at the others, shaking his head slightly before continuing. "None of them understand."
Bastun turned away, eager to regainhis place in the shadow of the bow, but looked sidelong at Duras before he did so.
"And you do?"
Duras didn't answer, and they both walked away from the question.
Bastun sat back into the bow's curve and stared westward, even though his thoughts lay just a short distance to the east. He contemplated using his mask to eavesdrop on Thaena and Duras, but decided against it. He had heard enough. It was already decided that the rusalka came for the vremyonni, that the land would reject him at every turn and that not even the ethran could quell the spirits' anger. It was all the same to him, the evolution of an idea that would never lift from his back.
The faint image of Ulseta still hung in the back of his thoughts, his long-lost sister haunting him once again. It felt strange that he had forgotten what she'd looked like. In some way he had the rusalka to thank for reminding him. It was shortly after Ulsera's funeral that he had been taken to the vremyonni and hidden away among the Running Rocks. No rusalka dream-song could lull him to rest by summoning memories of that time in his life.
The western shore, though still a few hours away, was just visible on the horizon. The Firward Mountains rose to the north, giant silhouettes in a deeper black against the night sky. Dark clouds hung over the horizon, harbingers of the winter storm that had stirred the waters of the Ashane. He could make out no details of that shoreline, but he could imagine them. Broken walls, hollow buildings marked by char and ice, and the lonely streets winding through ancient ruins walked only by the dead. Shandaular's conquest had solidified the rise of the Narfell Empire over two millennia

ago. It was left abandoned and forgotten by most, much like its conquerors.

Bastun was curious to see the city himself, to witness the towers of the Shield, though he would have little time before the hathran that watched the citadel made good on his recent request. The trial seemed like a lifetime ago—as did the events that had preceded his being questioned. His master had handed to him the staff he carried just moments before succumbing to mortal wounds. It was there, sitting in the snow somewhere on the edges of the Ashenwood, feeling more alone than he had since Ulsera's death, that he had made his decision.

Quiet now, the journey continued uninterrupted. Those enchanted by the rusalka were already being clapped on the back and teased about their longing for the water maidens. The nearness of Shandaular, however, kept their jests and challenges short. All of them felt the shadow on the horizon and the prayers returned, whispers and folk-magic to ward off the attentions of evil spirits. Shandaular, the City of Weeping Ghosts, was no place to forget one's faith.

It had been his master, Keffrass, who had taught him the secrets of Shandaular and inducted him at a very young age into the brotherhood of the vremyonni. Bastun promised himself that he would see the city, at least once, before sentence was passed. The wychlaren, having founded an outpost at the Shield, once called Dun-Tharyn, used it for purposes such as this. The trial was long over, and Bastun had been given a choice. It had always been so in Rashemen that there were two choices for a male who found the path of the wizard—go to the

vremyonni, shut away from society at the Running Rocks, or accept exile.

Bastun had chosen the latter, eventually.

Now that self-imposed exile was mete hours away. For all the choices he had made, he would never look upon Rashemen again.

He could not shake the nagging details of their encounter with the rusalka. Perhaps it was coincidence, merely the proximity of his thoughts to a particular location, and perhaps not—but out of all the hundreds of lyrics and stanzas of the Firedawn Cycle... the rusalka had sung about the Shield. Pondering this, he settled back into his seat, pulled his hood low and his cloak tight, and awaited the ship's imminent arrival with a troubled mind.

chapter two

Ruined and forbidding, the walls of Shandaular rose through the fog. Snow covered most of what Bastun could see. The rest lay hidden in shadow and mist. Lanterns at the bow illuminated a landing of ancient stone columns bridged by a wooden dock only a few years old. Several warriors prepared a plank and the ropes to tie down the felucca. The last steps of Bastun's Rashemi life stretched through the abandoned city, and he was anxious to put those steps behind him.

Winter's chill was as cold here as it had been on the journey across Lake Ashane, but it pierced far deeper than any cloak or armor could protect. Wind moaned through the broken walls, making sounds that could have been breeze or voice.

Led by Thaena and Duras, the fang disembarked, one warrior staying close by Bastun the entire length of the dock. Gathering on shore, hands on weapons, they took in the sight of the city walls, blackened by the ancient fires of the Nentyarch's army. Bastun's boots crunched on a packed layer of ice and snow. The warrior following shoved him as he passed, sneering, the man's face covered in runic scars. The vremyonni took a shuddering breath, remembering the teachings and meditations of Keffrass, and relaxed before sitting on a piece of broken wall to await the next step.

Thaena and Duras stood barely a stone's throw away, looking toward a collapsed watchtower just to the north along

the wall. Smoke and glowing embers steamed in the bowl-like impression of the tower's collapse—a good location for a

signal fire that seemed to have burned itself out.
"Syrolf," Duras said to the runescarred warrior, "take some men and scout the wychlaren's path. Do not go too far and report back anything you find."
Syrolf nodded, grumbling as he passed the vremyonni to select a group of scouts. They disappeared through a break in the wall, barely disturbing the thick fog as they prowled into the city streets like a pack of hunting wolves. The wychlaren warded the paths to the Shield to protect them from the hordes of spirits wandering the city
Looking back to the smoldering remains of the signal fire, Bastun decided that caution was likely a prudent decision, and he endeavored to keep a careful eye on their surroundings. Shandaular was no place to let down one's guard. Adventurers from across Faerun had avoided the city's dangers. Despite how the others might have felt, Bastun had no cause or desire to trust the wychlaren. They had been warned by the vremyonni several years ago against using the Shield as an outpost for watching Rashemen's western borders. The fact that they had chosen to ignore that advice didn't surprise him in the least.
The rest of the fang stood alert, some pacing, their eyes never leaving the break in the wall where Syrolf and the others had entered. Much like the wolves they revered, the warriors were sure and silent. Each carried a long sword and a curved short sword, the traditional weapons of the Ice Wolf fang, though several also wielded wicked hand axes. The longer the warriors waited, the more they took on a lean and hungry look.
The sound of footsteps in the snow brought Bastun's attention to the approach of Duras. Absently he brushed the mask over his face, feeling safe in the confines of the familiar covering, and looked away. Duras leaned against the stone that Bastun had found and crossed his arms, casually watching the walls and the sky as well.
"Could be snow soon," the warrior said, scanning the dark

clouds.
Bastun shook his head slightly. "Yes, I suppose so." Duras merely nodded.
"Is that it then?" Bastun said. "Nearly twenty years we haven't seen each other—practically our entire lives—and we end up sitting on a rock talking about the weather?"
Duras frowned, before finally looking Bastun in the eye. "Seemed as good a topic as any," he said, then added, "considering."
"Considering...." Bastun said even as he felt the weight of an awkward silence looming in the conversation. "Yes, I suppose so."
The silence settled in faster than he'd expected, and he regretted his words. Both of them looked around, listening to the wind as it whistled through the shadows of the city. Thaena glanced once at the pair with what Bastun assumed was disapproval, but she said nothing and returned to watching for Syrolf. Bastun wondered what it would have been like to take this final journey, just him, Duras, and Thaena.
For a moment the wind slowed, and its whistling stopped. In the silence that followed a second sound echoed through the fog, far away, and yet there was no distance great enough to hear such sounds from: moans and cries of anguish, muffled screams, and shouts of anger. No living throats could have made the sounds. Bastun stood to get closer to the break in the wall, but the wind returned stronger than before, drowning out the distant voices of the dead.
Bastun stepped back toward the rock, disappointed and looking forward to his next opportunity to study an odd pattern he'd heard in the voices.
"Why are we here, Bastun?" Duras asked, his voice hoarse and suddenly very serious.
Any true answer might have taken far longer to explain than they had time for, so many answers seemed obvious at the

moment. Obvious to him at least, for Duras could not know what it was like to be taken away from everything he knew.
Bastun stared again at the faint scar on the staff in his hand. "We are here to say goodbye, Duras," he answered at length. "That and to hope that memory holds us true to one another."
Duras was quiet, and Bastun hoped that it was answer enough. Despite what his emotions might scream he had no real malice toward his old friend, nor to Thaena. Circumstance had driven him to live apart from things that had once given him joy. The lack had left its mark, and all he had left were the memories and the pretending. Looking to Thaena—at her balled fists and constant stare after Syrolf and the scouts, her chin held high to maintain an air of composure despite the now hidden voices of the dead—he decided that most of them were pretending in one fashion or another, perhaps all of them.
Duras nodded slowly and stood again, walking to rejoin the ethran and leave Bastun to his thoughts.
A quiet thunder, muffled by clouds heavy with snow, crackled above, breaking the vremyonni's darker line of thought and heralding the return of Syrolf and his scouts. All of the scouts kept their weapons drawn as they approached Thaena and Duras. The look on Syrolf s scarred face caused Bastun to edge nearer to hear their report.
"What have you found?" Thaena asked Syrolf.
"The wychlaren's paths have been compromised, ethran," Syrolf answered matter-of-factly, his gaze drifting once toward Bastun before returning to Thaena. "Many of the markers still stand, but others have been defaced or scratched out completely. There were no signs of anyone else—anyone living—in the area that we searched."
Not a weapon in sight lacked a ready hand upon it. The dawning realization that their simple mission had just become more complicated was evident on every face and in every

steaming breath exhaled into the wind.
"What is your will, ethran?" Duras asked, his voice breaking the heavy silence.
Everyone looked to Thaena then. For a moment, Bastun feared his long-awaited exile would have to wait.
"We will push on to the Shield," she said. "The hathran there will see the vremyonni and then see him exiled to the lands of the west. As by tradition and the othlor's order."
Duras nodded, as did Syrolf. The pair began gathering the rest of the fang into a defensive formation for the trek through Shandaular. Few orders were needed, each warrior instinctively aware of their place among the others. Bastun was anxious to see the ancient Shield, to match the reality of it to his studies. Keffrass had often spoken of its history and importance, though he had remained haunted by his visit. Thaena appeared beside Bastun, watching the fang being readied for the march.
"You will stay close to Duras and I," she said, "I'm sure I do not have to explain why."
"Of course, ethran," he replied, then added, "And no, an explanation is unfortunately not necessary."
Thaena looked as if she were about to say something else, but merely nodded and joined Duras at the head of the group. Bastun followed. Half the number of the fang, about fifteen warriors, led the way through the break in the wall and into the deeper fog. Their torches made spheres of flickering light in the thick mist, providing scant, but still helpful, illumination for those behind. Syrolf was at his back once more, only now his sword was unsheathed.
A curving street led northwest through heavy fog. Shadowy buildings loomed on either side—far more intact than Bastun had expected. Ornate arches, cracked and charred, framed stone doors. Columns depicting unnamed beasts and faceless figures crouched at every corner or lay broken in dark alleys. Odd symbols and runes squirmed beneath the thick ice that

crusted the many arches, a familiar theme that made navigation of the maze difficult.

At the center of Shandaular lay the first archway, a mysterious portal connecting the city to another Shandaular in the far south—yet another ruin left to rot. Though both cities were old, their portals were far older, created by an ancient magic that few understood and even fewer had learned to use.

Occasionally Thaena would call a short halt to inspect small obelisks along the sides of the winding path. Each was firmly rooted in the ground, strong stone brought from Rashemen. Engraved with a single sigil, their magic kept the path free of the city's spirits. Only now the sigils appeared ruined and smeared with ash. Thaena knelt and whispered to them, trying to detect the magic they held.

A light snow began to fall. The wind increased, whipping the cloaks and the long braids of the Rashemi warriors. The fog stirred, combining with the swirling snow to obscure the path ahead even more. Venturing into the tighter streets of another district, the group slowed, wary of every corner and shadow. The distant sounds of the dead became more noticeable after crossing the boundary of the low inner wall. As the city had expanded, concentric rings of walls, three in all, were left in place and kept fortified as their enemies grew bolder. During siege, the citizens would retreat behind the inner wall for protection in the shadow of the Shield and close to the central portal-arch.

Blackened stone and shattered walls replaced much of the discernible architecture. Thick ice filled the cracks and clung to the standing structures like malformed gargoyles. Bastun eyed these warily, his thoughts drifting to his studies of the Shield as the torches revealed blurred skulls and shadowy bones buried in the ice. Here in the inner city, in Shandaular's last moments, death had taken its greatest harvest.

A loud wailing arose a few blocks away, echoing against the

buildings and through the narrow streets. Others seemed to answer it, and Thaena ordered the warriors to a halt. The tortured voices of unseen spirits carried far over the ruins, issuing from the doors of hollow buildings, moaning with the wind as they slowly trailed away. Bastun strained to hear the nuances of the spirits' cries, sensing some missing note in the rhythm.

The cries drifted north, growing fainter, and many held breaths were quietly exhaled as Thaena waved the fang onward.

Bastun caught himself looking left and right, his eyes darting at every imagined movement. Shadows lengthened and disappeared as the torches passed, surrounding them with phantom enemies. The faces of fantastic beasts leered from stone columns, given life in the flickering flames to taunt those intruding upon Shandaular's lingering misery.

Several warriors reached into pouches at their belts to pull out pinches of soil which they kissed and sprinkled on the snow as they passed. Bastun imagined these offerings to Shandaular's spirits might not be well-accepted in a place so far from Rashemen, but the effort was a testament to the fang's respect for the dead. Even so, more than a few rubbed the flat of their blades with the remaining soil on their palms, a request for strength against evil and a preparation for fighting those dead who would not so respect the living.

Duras moved closer to Thaena, leaning his tall frame to reach her ear.

"Have you attempted to contact the Shield's hathran?" he whispered just loud enough for Bastun to hear. She nodded, her eyes never leaving the path ahead.

"Only silence greets me," she answered, then held up her hand to signal the location of yet another obelisk. Kneeling, she studied the ash and markings defacing its warding sigil. Bastun edged closer to observe the mark himself. Thaena started as he approached but allowed him to continue. He heard her whisper a quiet spell, attempting once again to

summon any magic left in the stone, but she shook her head afterwards, finding nothing.
"It's the same each time, as if the magic were drained," she said. She stepped back as Bastun kneeled closer.
Narrowing his eyes he studied the ashes, disturbed by the wind and smeared across the original marking. Removing one glove he felt the smooth stone, feeling the slight imperfections caused by some powerful strike, likely with a sharp stone or edged weapon. Touching the sigil with his fingertips he stained them with the ashes and rubbed them between his thumb and index finger. Raising them to his mask he sniffed them, two small holes in the mask allowing him room to breath.
"The ashes are moist—some form of oil—and they smell of brimstone," he said, tilting his head and pondering the mystery.
"This means something to you?" Thaena asked.
"Possibly. Perhaps we may find one with the ashes in a more discernable shape to study."
Thaena nodded and gestured for him to rejoin the formation. As the group moved on, Bastun sniffed his fingertips again, still feeling the oily moisture clinging to them, and noted that they did not frost despite the cold. Different oils could be used in several spells he was aware of, but the odor of the brimstone dominated this one's scent. The combination nagged at his memory, and he looked forward to the next obelisk as the path wound northward around a rubble-filled mound of destroyed buildings.
The song of the rusalka, the dream-like lyrics of the Firedawn Cycle, played in his mind over and over again. The power in the Cycle had been born in an age when the wychlaren were few. It carried the legacy of Raumathar into a new era. Because of it, most knew of the battle that had destroyed Shandaular, of the Nentyarch's desire for the city's portal. Few pondered why the Shield remained standing or why the city's cursed spirits refused to go near the fortress— except

the vremyonni. He hoped that those vremyonni secrets had remained safe and well-hidden for Rashemen's sake.
On the northern end of their path around the wall of rubble, Thaena signaled the place of another obelisk. This time she waved Bastun along with her to inspect the stone, eliciting a frustrated sigh from Syrolf. Thaena seemed not to hear the warrior, but Duras glowered at him as Bastun moved to accompany the ethran.
He noted that the stone did indeed bear a stronger marking of ash over the original sigil and he studied the odd symbol from several angles trying to discern its meaning. Duras approached from behind to look as well, but after a moment he returned his gaze to the end of the street.
"There's some sort of clearing up ahead," he remarked to Thaena, squinting through the fog.
"Yes," Bastun said, not looking up from the obelisk. "If memory serves, it should be an old merchant square."
"I'd like to take the lead group to scout the area."
"Of course, Duras," Thaena said, also involved in Bastun's observation. "We shall be along shortly with the others."
Bastun's mind flew through the tomes of history he had studied among the vremyonni, trying to place the odd smearing of ash, the vague shape that just barely escaped his memory. Duras led the lead warriors toward the clearing, leaving Syrolf in charge of the fifteen in the rear. More of the oddly quiet thunder rumbled, and the snow came on in larger flakes as Bastun tried to shield the symbol from being obscured. The sound of the warriors' boots crunching through the snow was powerfully loud, amplified by his mask, and he tried to shut out the world around him.
The Firedawn Cycle still tugged at his mind, keeping a rhythm he could not shake from his thoughts. Sighing in consternation, he caught himself humming the tune and looked back at the the sigil from the opposite side of the obelisk. His mind refused to recognize it.
At the distant end of the street he heard Duras's group stop,

their voices low as they discussed something they'd found.
Shutting out their voices, Bastun drew closer to understanding what he was seeing. Thaena had backed away, watching the bobbing light of the torches through the snow with concern.
"Is this supposed to be here?" Bastun heard them say, a slight echo among the close buildings of the merchant square.
It clicked in his mind: an ancient book on ancient and extant languages of the north. An arch here, a straight line there, the pattern matched well. He remembered the page, a listing of ancient arcane alphabets in the surrounding regions of Rashemen. His eyes widened in alarm and his quick intake of breath drew Thaena's attention.
"It looks like the path has been blocked," Duras's voice said, a note of caution echoing in Bastun's ears.
"Call them back!" he said and faced the distant clearing. "The symbol is of the Nar!"
chapter Three
Running toward the open square, Bastun yelled through the fog. Dulled thunder rolled through the clouds. The wind picked up, obscuring his warnings. Syrolf shouted behind him, running to stop him, but as the wind shifted Bastun could already hear the sound of taut bowstrings straining against the curve of bows. He spun around, seeing Syrolf several paces back, and waved his hand.
"Get down!"
Arrows whipped through the fog, cracking against buildings on the eastern side of the road. Several found their marks. A few warriors dropped to their knee with arrows embedded in shoulders and legs or long cuts where the missiles had grazed exposed skin. Bastun rolled in the snow, diving behind a nearby column for cover. Shouts erupted from the square down the street, a similar attack taking Duras by surprise. The Rashemi acted quickly, scattering and spreading out so they would not be such easy targets. Syrolf

and a few others formed a semi-circle around Thaena, who began casting.
Bastun watched and waited as Thaena wove a spell of protection against the bows. The energy she summoned made tiny ripples in the Weave that he could feel, tempting him to call upon his own magic. He gritted his teeth, breathing slow and even.
The attackers loosed another volley of arrows, this time at Thaena, but her spell held strong, knocking the missiles from the air to land useless in the snow.
Rocks shifted from the ruin on the western side of the road, and with a fierce war cry the Nar burst from their hiding spots, brandishing axes and long-handled swords. The fang answered that cry with a call every bit as fierce, growling as they summoned the famed rage of the berserkers. Up the street, Duras and the rest of the warriors howled their own call to battle and formed a line to close the square into a killing ground.
Bastun gripped his staff. The warriors to the south prowled forward, baring their teeth and hunched low to the ground, ready to spring. Duras to the north did much the same, backing out of bow range to force their attackers to come forth and face them. Though slightly greater in numbers, the Nar were more than evenly matched. Thaena held her staff low, respecting the stand-off and ready to add her magic to the battle. The guards that protected her were ready to lay down their lives in her defense and eager to lay down many more Nar lives in doing so.
No one looked for Bastun. No warrior came to fight at his side or even glanced his way. Under normal circumstances Bastun would have preferred this, but under normal circumstances his hands would not be so tied by wychlaren law.
The Nar poured down the fog-shrouded rubble. Fur cloaks flowed around their broad shoulders, their bare arms riddled with tattoos. Bows had been left behind in favor of the

vicious heavy blades they bore with ease. As they reached the base of the pile and continued their charge across the snow, they shouted battle cries. The Rashemi charged back, closing their spread line and raising their voices in unison.

Steel rang against steel, and the Nar cries dissolved into grunts and challenges. The Rashemi continued growling, losing themselves in an animal fury that grew with each strike. Thaena cast globes of crackling black energy into the fray, taking at least one screaming Nar to the ground where he writhed for long moments before laying still. Bastun heard Duras's voice from the north, but he could only see the faint glow of dropped torches on the ground. Blurry silhouettes danced, flickered, and disappeared in the fog.

Biting his lip, Bastun fought to maintain his calm. He was forbidden to cast any magic until safely away from Shandaular's borders. He knew the wychlaren could not have suspected the Nar would enter the city so brazenly, and for a heartbeat he wondered how the Nar had accomplished such a feat in the first place. Peering south again, he saw the Nar had not been prepared for the berserkers and had backed up several paces to defend themselves against the assault. To their credit, the Nar maintained a fierceness that was impressive.

Syrolf slashed again and again in wild abandon, seeming possessed as he bore down on yet another foe. Finding the proper opening, he swept the thick-bladed short sword behind his opponent's knee, lifting high and laying the Nar on his back to be hacked apart before he could rise. Cries of victory spurred the others on and they called out their kills, competing with one another even in combat.

Thaena's circle of guards had joined the rest of the fang to better face their attackers. The ethran stood her ground fiercely, shattering a Nar blade with a gesture and swinging her staff into his jaw. Before his broken teeth had time to disappear into the snow, she was casting again. She spun and sang words of magic, a vision of Rashemi myth and

legend leaving her foes in ruin.
In the midst of the battle, Bastun detected the sound of more rocks tumbling from the wall of rubble, his mask picking up the noise of steel sliding from leather scabbards. A second group of seven Nar had crept to the base of the wall in silence, murder in their eyes as they saw Thaena's exposed back. Bastun cursed and pulled the hood from his head, measuring his breath as he stepped from behind the column to intercept the would-be assassins.
"Forbiddance be damned," he whispered and charged forward, chanting a spell and hurling a sphere of ice that exploded in the chest of the lead barbarian. The man cried out in shock and pain, bleeding and gasping for air as he fell.
Positioning himself between the Nar and Thaena, Bastun challenged them. Long, thin braids framed his mask, and the wind whipped at his cloak, revealing layers of light leather armor. His heart pounded as the freedom of battle built within him. Though Bastun had joined the vremyonni, his master had nurtured and encouraged the Rashemi fury in his spirit. Spells clamored in his mind for release, and he chose quickly as the Nar abandoned stealth to advance on the lone wizard.
Bastun cast again, and shadows curled from the ground beneath the Nar, becoming solid and wrapping around the legs of three, pulling them down. Two others sidestepped the writhing black tentacles and the third rushed forward, raising an axe to strike. Hissing a command word, Bastun brought his staff forward, the steel sphere at its tip flashing and screeching as it grew into a long, curving axe blade.
The two axes sparked as they clanged together. Bastun smiled at the surprise in the barbarian's eyes. He pushed the Nar back before swinging at the man's stomach. The Nar attempted a block with his own axe, but he was forced to jump back at the unexpected ferocity of the vremyonni. He became entangled in the net of tentacles that had taken his

fellow warriors.
Bastun reversed the swing and ripped open the Nar's leather breastplate, slashing through flesh and sending the barbarian into the shadowy web. A second Nar came from his left, sneering as he closed with his long blade. Bastun blocked the attack with his axe, defending himself as he chanted, the magic spilling from his mind. Knocking the Nar's sword aside he thrust out his right hand, slamming a burst of force into the Nar's chest that sent the barbarian spinning into the wall of rubble.
The remaining Nar ran past the vremyonni and charged Thaena. Turning, she had no time to prepare another spell.
She raised her staff, shock in her eyes. A stream of fire flowed from Bastun's fingertips as he ran at the Nar's back, watching the fur cloak burst into flames as the man fell to the ground. Screaming and throwing off the cloak, the Nar tried to rise, and Bastun kicked him in the side, knocking the man on his back. Roaring, he buried his axe in the Nar's exposed chest and ended his struggles.
Breathing heavily, Bastun met Thaena's stare, unreadable behind the mask, but Bastun expected he did not see the gratitude of an old friend, rather the quiet judgment of the wychlaren. Behind her, the other Nar were trying to retreat in the face of the fang's fury. Few of the attackers remained standing, and the Rashemi suffered only shallow cuts and bruises—nothing to slow down their battle lust.
Grunting, Bastun freed his axe from the dead barbarian and turned to the Nar still trapped in shadowy tentacles. With a word and a gesture, he threw a small ball of wet clay into the middle of the writhing mass. The snow nearby turned brown as the ground beneath them liquefied and bubbled. A few of the Nar screamed as they sank, intensifying their attempts to escape the tentacles, but within moments the entire grisly scene had disappeared into the muddy soil. Bastun barely glanced at the sodden mess before sprinting toward the open square to assist Duras.

On the edge of the battleground, he surveyed the fight. Thirteen Nar still stood, backing toward a makeshift barricade of old wood and stone across the wychlaren's path. Cast-aside torches guttered in the snow, their flickering light shining in the eyes of dead Nar and flashing on swinging blades. Duras fought at the lead, snarling as he traded blow after blow with the Nar. An arrow shaft in his shoulder had broken off in the struggle, but he seemed not to notice the injury.

The sounds of battle had faded behind him, and Bastun heard another noise in the distance. Just below the clang of steel and grunts of pain a low moaning carried itself on the wind. Bastun took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as the battle-lust left his muscles and his heart slowed to a normal rhythm. Concentrating, he whispered a spell, hoping that his message could penetrate the fury in the mind of Duras. Knowing that any spoken words might fall on deaf ears, he willed his thoughts to reach the warrior. The moaning grew louder and closer, and he shouted through the Weave.

Duras! The dead! They're coming! Let the Nar retreat!

Duras shook his head, confused, and shoved the Nar facing him back into the barricade. Thrusting and slashing he did not slow his attack, and Bastun repeated the message. Duras's fury faltered a bit as the warning pierced through his bloodlust. Shaking his head again and stepping back from the battle, he cast a glance at Bastun, blinking as he tried to calm himself. Taking heaving breaths, he nodded, gritting his teeth as he sheathed his long sword and drew an ivory hunting horn from his belt. Halfway to Bastun he blew a long note on the horn—a call for retreat. The other members of the fang held back their attacks, shaking off their fury as they gave ground to their foes. The Nar, however, mistook the cue and renewed their assault, complicating the situation. Duras reached for his sword, torn between Bastun's warning and returning to the battle.

Bastun studied the opening of the square even as Thaena

and Syrolf advanced from behind. Calling the correct spells to mind he stepped toward Duras.
"Go!" he said, meeting the warrior's gaze with a quiet confidence he hoped would sway his old friend, then added, "Call the retreat again and keep Thaena and the others back. Trust me."
Hesitating, Duras nodded and blew the horn as he rushed to stop the others. An odd chill had filtered into the wind, and the scent of death filled Bastun's nostrils as he watched the warriors fall back against the Nar advance. Arcane words tumbled passed his lips, and from a pouch at his belt he pulled a pinch of sulfur. The sulfur hissed as it burned away, singeing
the fingers of his glove. Hundreds of tiny glowing lights appeared all over the ground, silencing the arguments he could hear between Duras and Syrolf.
Gesturing at the Nar, Bastun watched the lights scurry away, leaving little trails through the snow. Weaving in between the legs of the Rashemi they crawled, glowing embers of living flame, to leap at the legs of the Nar. The ambushers fell back, trying to brush off the hundreds fiery spiders that bit and burned whatever they touched. The Rashemi obeyed the call to retreat, cries of surprise becoming screams of pain behind them as they rejoined the rest of the fang.
Everyone heard the moaning now—a chorus of wailing voices on a chilled breeze of decay. The dim torches on the ground guttered out, leaving only the tiny lights of the swarming spiders visible through the fog and growing darkness. Bastun backed toward the rest of the group as a deeper darkness crept along the edges of the barricade. Black forms distinguished themselves in the crawling shadow, twisted arms and malformed heads, incorporeal bodies that swam through a multitudinous wave of spirits.
"What evil have you summoned, vremyonni?" Syrolf whispered.
Bastun didn't answer. Reaching Thaena's side he waved her

back.
"We have to go—now,"he said, trying to be silent, though he knew it didn't matter against the senses of the dead. The edges of the crawling cloud reached the panicking Nar, and a second set of voices joined the moaning, the screams of the Nar just as chilling as the winter wind. The nimbus of crawling light surrounding a few of the Nar moved through the fog toward Bastun and the fang, trying to escape the grim tide of death.
Chanting and spreading a fine dust over the snow, Thaena strode forward and slammed her staff into the ground. As she completed the spell, a shimmering barrier materialized between the buildings on the right and the wall of rubble on the left. Walking swiftly, she returned to the group and nodded to Duras.
"Now we go," she said coldly.
The fang moved quickly back the way they had come. No one turned to watch the fate of the Nar. Only Bastun looked to see them beating against the ethran's invisible wall as the dead engulfed them. Then Syrolf blocked his view, scowling with sword in hand to keep the vremyonni moving.
After a few blocks, losing themselves in the maze of Shandaular's streets, Duras broke the silence.
"What is happening, Thaena? How did Nar get into Shandaular?"
The ethran didn't answer right away, her steely gaze fixed on the road ahead. Similar questions were at the forefront of Bastun's thoughts as well, but he wondered not how the Nar got in, rather why they would come to such a place at all.
"We'll return to the second wall," Thaena answered. "I remember seeing an intact gatehouse. We shall tend to our wounded and discuss the situation there."
Duras nodded, apparently not wishing to press her further on the subject, and moved to direct the lead warriors toward the gatehouse.
Bastun noticed a trail of little spots appearing ahead of his

every step—each one a bright scarlet, dripped from the wounds of the warriors. Some of them pressed against deep cuts, while others tried to disguise a slight limp. This behavior too—though a common point of pride among all berserkers—was also taken from the wolf, who would hide or attempt to ignore injury to stay with the pack. It was another reason Bastun wished he'd been one of them—and also one of the primary reasons he was not and never would be.

"You wasted no time ignoring the rules of your exile, Bastun," Thaena said, still looking forward.

"I did what I thought best," he replied. "I—I meant no disrespect."

"The Nar have... changed things," she said, her eyes scanning the shadows among the ruin, and let the matter of rules and laws drop. He too could not keep from wondering if another ambush awaited them, though his heart raced at her nearness. "The Shield s hathran may be in need of our assistance."

"You suspect the Shield to be in danger?" he asked.

"I can imagine few other reasons for the Nar to be here, in this broken city," she said, echoing his thoughts. "And no one comes here without a good reason."

He said nothing else, thinking of his own reasons for being brought here and the life he might know upon leaving again. The presence of his old friends tangled his thoughts and hopes for a different life. At the moment he wished that the wychlaren had chosen someone else to lead this mission, someone he could look straight through and despise without complication.

Thaena glanced at him, her eyes unreadable within the wychlaren mask, and whispered, "Thank you, Bastun—for ignoring the rules."

"There's no need, Thaena, I—" he said, trying to catch her eye before she returned to careful study of the dark corners they passed, but she seemed already far distant again, "It's nice... to hear something familiar."

"Familiar?"
"Your voice, speaking my name," he said. "It's been a long time."
She looked at him once, before quickening her stride to join Duras at the head of the formation. Bastun watched her until she became just another blur in the fog, another set of anonymous footprints in the snow. Sighing, he chided himself and shook his head.
"You're welcome," he said under his breath.
After his sister's funeral he had not been allowed to meet or speak with anyone before being taken away to the Running Rocks. The wychlaren had thought it best. The rumors were spreading, and due to his magical talent he would be joining the vremyonni. They thought that with time the stories would be forgotten and that the rumors would fade away. Thaena and Duras had become a dream and Ulsera a nightmare. Seeing his old friends both now made that dream more real and his nightmare even more so—the memory that he had been the one to send Ulsera to her death.
The snow grew deeper as they walked, the footsteps before and behind Bastun growing louder and more forced. Even in the wind he could hear the return of the whispers. Glancing over his shoulder, Bastun saw Syrolf striding close on his heels as if leading an angry mob, which he likely did. The fang called him prejhenovani, or "one who summons evil"—and considering the Nar attack, Bastun felt inclined to agree. Misfortune seemed a traveling companion he could not shake.
He looked to each of the obelisks they'd passed before the ambush, and he contemplated the ash smeared in Nar symbols atop them. The warriors they'd fought could be the least of their worries if they encountered the author of those symbols.
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chapter Four
(racks in the stone gatehouse were encrusted with ice

unaffected by torches or the gathering warmth of so many bodies inside the lowest level. The stone had charred, but not so much as the structures within the third wall, the ones closest to the Shield where demons had swarmed among the flames and screams.

Every few moments, when wind stirred the fog, the faint silhouette of the distant fortress appeared. Bastun marveled at the endurance of such a monument—hidden for so long, forgotten by the world—and shuddered at the thought of what lay buried inside.

In a corner of the room, through a small arrow slit, he stared outside and listened for the voice of Thaena. She had taken a chamber upstairs to confer with Duras and Syrolf. It had been left to the rest of the fang to keep watch over the vremyonni while binding their wounds and using wychlaren salves to staunch bleeding. Their eyes, when they found him, left little to the imagination. They were Rashemi and Bastun had chosen not to be; the berserkers were rarely open-minded on the subject of loyalty. Sighing, he closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, close to a sizeable crack that reached from foundation up to the ceiling and beyond. The voices of the ethran and her warriors whispered through his mask.

"Most of the fang will be fine," Duras said, "and they shall be more than ready should we encounter a second ambush."

"That is one thing I think we can be sure of," Syrolf said. "For all we know they could be on their way here now."

"No," said Duras, "I don't think they would brave pushing past the spirits we encountered to attack an enemy in a fortified position. At least, not until dawn."

"We will not wait for dawn," Thaena said, her voice firm. "These Nar have moved too close to Rashemen. They threaten our outpost at the Shield."

"Is that not the least bit coincidental?" Syrolf asked. Bastun could hear him pacing as he continued. "That the Nar are here ? Now of all times ?"

No one answered, and Syrolf stopped pacing. Bastun strained to hear, curious to know if these three knew something he didn't—or more importantly knew something that they shouldn't.
"What do you mean?" Thaena asked.
"Considering recent events and decisions made in—"
"Just get to the point, Syrolf," Duras said, an edge in his tone.
"The vremyonni," Syrolf answered. "No, I mean, the exile."
"You are suggesting that Bastun may be responsible for the Nar attack?" Thaena asked. "Ridiculous," Duras said.
"You haven't even considered the notion yourself?" Syrolf said. "On the ship we were attacked by rusalkas—in the presence of an ethran, no less! Now here we find Nar tribesmen and our safe paths compromised by their magic? Go downstairs and see for yourself. Not a soul down there hasn't considered that the exile is behind whatever is going on."
"There's no point!" Duras said. "What could Bastun possibly gain?"
"It is not my business to think like an exile or a murderer," Syrolf answered, "but I have some experience in trusting my gut... and keeping a sharp eye on one who has made it clear that his loyalties do not lie with Rashemen."
SyrolPs words hung in the air. Bastun fought the scream building in his chest, the pressure of his frustration almost too much to bear as he pretended to doze against the wall.
"Bastun is not a murderer," Duras said at length, his voice low, but Bastun could hear a menacing tone behind the words. He could imagine the burning stare between the two.
"And you know this for sure?" Syrolf said. "As I heard the tale, the evidence at the vremyonni's trial told an uneven tale. The theft of several scrolls? He didn't have them, but he knew what was in them. I heard they spoke of Shandaular. The death of Keffrass? No solid evidence, but he was the only one there. He stood at that trial, with the sole

possession of his dead master in his hands, and requested to be exiled. A sentence traditionally carried out here in this place. He knew exactly where he would be taken."
"Do you question the judgment of your superiors, Syrolf?" Duras's voice rose further.
"Should I even bring up what they say about his sister—?"
"Enough!" Thaena snapped, and the pair fell silent.
Bastun gripped his staff tighdy in trembling hands, his thumb resting in the weapon's narrow scar as he counted his heartbeats one by one until they slowed. Though Syrolf had said little of the details, Bastun's thoughts raced with memories of the past.
"I apologize, ethran," Duras said. '
Syrolf said nothing. Thaena walked toward the wall closest to Bastun, just above him. He imagined she looked out over Shandaular from th£ arrow slit there just as he had. She could surely feel as well as he that something was amiss in the fragile order the wychlaren had established in Shandaular. The Weave was strong in the city, but wild and wavering, as if it were reacting to some old wound. Their spells had worked well enough, but the taste and feel of the magic was different. Like a warning.
"We have little reason to suspect Bastun of any involvement with the Nar," Thaena said.
"I disagree, ethran," Syrolf said. "We should—"
"But," Thaena continued, quieting the warrior, "he has chosen his exile, for whatever reason, and cannot be viewed as loyal to Rashemen because of it. It is not in my nature to trust such a man or to respect his choice, but I will also not place blame on him every time I stub my toe. Our mission was to bring him to the Shield for examination by the hathran and then to see him away to the west, never to return.
"That still is our mission, but we must also work to eliminate any threat to Rashemen by discovering why the Nar are here and what they have done. If my sisters are threatened we

are dutybound to assist them. We will have no summary executions unless the charges are backed by solid evidence. But we will also not be lax in our observation of the exile."
Thaena let her words sink in. Neither warrior responded.
"Am I understood?"
Bastun could only assume they agreed quietly, for the conversation ended. He opened his eyes and looked once again into the fog outside. He had to keep watching, for the faces of Ulsera and Keffrass were there when he closed his eyes. There had been fog on the day of Ulsera's funeral. It had been the last time he'd seen his parents. On the day of Keffrass's funeral he had been alone.
With ghosts and shadows residing in his mind, it took a few moments to realize that something was moving outside. He blinked and sat up, watching two faint figures stumble and push through the snow.
Guards outside the gatehouse called a warning and hailed the approaching figures. Several of the fang jumped to their feet and grabbed weapons as they rushed outside. Unwatched for the moment, Bastun got up and followed after them.
The wind whipped at his braided hair and robes as he neared the huddled figures who had fallen to their knees before the Rashemi warriors. Wrapped in a blanket, Bastun could make out a woman and a man, but as the woman raised her face into the torchlight he paused, stepping back and staring.
The woman's mask was elaborately decorated, as most wychlaren masks were, but in the details were the markings of a very different magic: forbidden symbols and runes that only graced the masks of the wychlaren's bitter rivals—the durthans.
The fang helped the woman to her feet. Seeing her mask they treated her with all the respect due to a hathran. Her companion, a pale-skinned man with sharp features, hung close by, warily watching their would-be rescuers. Bastun

gritted his teeth. Loosening his fingers, he prepared to defend himself, the Weave tingling across his knuckles.
As the visitors were being led toward shelter Thaena came from the gatehouse, followed by Duras and Syrolf. Seeing the stern glare of the ethran, they halted. Bastun breathed a sigh of relief as Thaena approached, her forearms crossed defensively. She had seen as quickly as he.
"Hold her!" she commanded. The warriors complied, though hesitantly. "Keep her still. She is not one of us."
The durthan stood tall, confident as Thaena studied her.
"Lady Ethran, I—" the woman began.
"Your formality is not required, durthan," Thaena said, ignoring the shocked glances of the berserkers. "We both know that my status among the wychlaren means nothing to you."
"Yes, I suppose you are right," the durthan answered calmly, then added, "I am called Anilya."
"Your name is unimportant," said Thaena, "and your presence here is unsurprising."
"Despite our differences we have much to discuss," Anilya said.
"I doubt that," Thaena replied, motioning to Anilya's captors and the other gathered warriors. "Bring her inside. Disarm her companion. Kill him if he tries anything."
The pale-skinned man bristled and bared his teeth, his eyeteeth small and sharp. Anilya shot him a look.
"Be still, Ohriman!" she shouted. He complied at her withering stare. "Wait for me and do as they command."
Anilya did not struggle as she was led by her arms to the gatehouse. Bastun caught her eye for only a heartbeat before Syrolf shoved him behind her. He turned and faced the warrior, meeting Syrolf s steady gaze long enough to let him know that he might not allow another provocation to go unanswered. Turning away slowly, he exhaled and followed the others.
The durthans companion was shoved against the gatehouse

wall, sevetal daggers and a thin sword removed from his belt. They tied his hands for good measure and posted a guard. Slumping against the stone, he sat in the snow, showing no sign of discomfort in the cold. Under the glow of the torches, his green eyes shined and his pupils narrowed to slits.

A tiefling, Bastun thought, and a durthan. This wasn't good.

Inside, Anilya was escorted to the back of the room, cornered and forced to sit with her hands laid plainly on her lap. Bastun resumed his place in his own corner, Syrolf close by, the warrior's eyes darting between the vremyonni and the durthan. The rest of the fang crouched, on alert, watching the door and listening as Thaena spoke to the unexpected prisoner.

"Tell me," Thaena said, "why should I wait for the hathran to lay sentence upon you? Why shouldn't I have you executed here and save my sisters the trouble?"

Anilya glanced casually at Duras's sword, held at the ready, and then to Thaena.

"That would seem to be a logical course of action," the durthan said in an even tone.

"Then you accept your part in what is occurring here?" Thaena asked. "Even for a durthan, allying with the Nar is—"

"Don't be foolish," Anilya interrupted. "I and mine have no part in whatever the Nar are doing here."

"I don't think it's entirely ridiculous to imagine the durthan making alliances with the Nar," Thaena said. "I do not hold traitors to Rashemen by any high moral standards."

A murmur of agreement passed through the fang at her words. Anilya met Thaena's cool gaze, their masks so much like night and day that Bastun briefly imagined the sun arguing with the moon.

"Traitors to the wychlaren perhaps. Not Rashemen. Never the land."

"However you wish to view it," Thaena said. "You will be taken to the Shield and dealt with by its hathran. Bind her

hands, Duras."
Duras sheathed his long sword, drew a dagger, and reached for a coil of rope at his hip.
"I'm afraid you'll find the hathran is in no condition to pass judgment on anyone," Anilya said, giving Duras pause to consider her words and look to the ethran.
"What are you saying?" Thaena asked, her hands curled into fists. "What have you done?"
"Nothing," the durthan answered. "But the Nar have been here for some days, and they have already breached the Shield."
Bastun's eyes widened. The grim faces of the fang were all focused on Anilya, but none of them could know the concern that Bastun felt.
"You're lying," Thaena said. "You're trying to trick me into something."
"Haven't you yet wondered why a durthan and a single swordsman approached a full fang of warriors, their ethran, and a vremyonni without raising a single blade or casting the most minor of spells?" Anilya said. "I came here to meet with you, to bring a proposal that would benefit us all."
Thaena stared hard at the durthan as Duras stood by with the rope. At length, she gestured Duras back.
"Speak quickly," she said.
Anilya leaned back into her corner, keeping her hands visible, and told of the durthans' watch over Shandaular and the lands of the west.
"We spied the Nar, members of the Creel tribe, riding east. As they neared Shandaular we grew curious, but my sisters did not deem it worthy enough to investigate further. I disagreed. Strangely though, I was unable to find the Nar by magic. Some presence among the Creel tore my spells apart. So I found a tracker—Ohriman, my companion outside. He and his band accompanied me into the city.
"We found the wychlaren's paths destroyed by magic—old magic—just as you no doubt have discovered. Sounds of

battle drew us further into the city. Though we saw no evidence of a struggle, we drew close enough to the Shield to know for certain that no Rashemi stood guard to stop us.
"While deciding what to do, we were attacked by the Nar, as you were. We escaped, evading the spirits of this place until we found shelter. We heard your battle, and I decided to come here and speak with you."
"Why?" Thaena asked. "Why would you even care what happens to the wychlaren?"
Bastun thought the same question, though his eyes were more open to the bigger picture. He did not entirely trust the durthan, but he understood their point of view well enough to see their reasoning.
"Honesdy?" Anilya said, then added, "I don't. Although my sisters and I have no use for the wychlaren, we do hold Rashemen itself precious and have no desire to suffer a Nar presence anywhere near it."
Thaena was silent. The durthan had made a good point. Though wayward, hostile, and steeped in darkness, the durthan did profess to a certain allegiance to the land that Bastun knew might resonate with the Rashemi. They would never trust her, would fight her or her sisters on any other occasion to defend the rule of the wychlaren, but against a common foe like the
Nar... Bastun shook his head, sensing what was to come next and fearing the consequences.
"Just what is it you propose, Anilya?" Thaena asked, her tone less accusing than before.
"A truce," the durthan replied. "Temporary of course, but long enough that we might use our combined strength against the Creel before they become too entrenched in the Shield to root out."
Bastun sighed, drawing an odd glance from Syrolf, whose hand never strayed from the sword at his side.
"And you feel that we cannot defeat these invaders without your help?" Duras asked, the coil of rope still in hand ready

to bind the durthan at Thaena's slightest gesture.
Anilya answered unfazed and as confident as before. "Not at all. The Creel are great warriors, but the berserkers of Rashemen are far greater."
"Then why would we agree to fight alongside a durthan and her motley band of sellswords?" Thaena asked.
"Because of whomever, or whatever, leads the Creel," Anilya said. "Whatever it was that brought them into the City of Weeping Ghosts—ruins they would never normally even risk a glance at—wields a power that evaded the attentions of the wychlaren and the durthan. It is something to be reckoned with, something that requires magic and as much steel as can be gathered."
Thaena nodded and Bastun's hopes faded.
"Syrolf," the ethran said. "Escort the durthan outside to wait with her companion."
The runescarred warrior complied and took Anilya by the arm. Once the door was closed, Thaena turned toward the fang and looked them each in the eye. Duras stared at the unused rope in his hands.
"Are you truly considering this, Thaena?" Duras asked. "Will we accept this proposal?"
"Pribeda, otvor vorta," she said, quoting an old Rashemi proverb. "Trouble is already here, Duras. We might as well open the gates and face it."
She held her head high as she addressed the fang.
"This is our only hope to protect the Shield. If any of you find fault in this truce, let it be known now. I will force no one to fight alongside an enemy. The felucca is ready to sail for those who wish to leave."
None of the fang met her gaze, but neither did any rise to leave or voice any objection. They would follow their ethran to their deaths if they must, despite the company she chose to march alongside them. Bastun could hear the whispering sigh of relief that Thaena let out behind her mask, and he found he did not envy her position.

She and Duras began preparations for the march to the Shield. The fang gathered their supplies and rechecked their bandages in relative silence. Thaena approached Syrolf and the warriors outside with the same decision moments later. Though Syrolf balked and grumbled more than the others he did not leave. For this, Bastun found himself thankful for Syrolf's presence, even when the warrior came to collect the vremyonni once again under his watchful eye.

The snow had thinned outside to only a light dusting of small flakes, but lightning still flashed silently though the clouds. Anilya and Ohriman led the procession toward the sellswords she claimed were waiting for their return. Bastun was eager to be on their way to the Shield. If what Anilya said was true, he would have to assume that the worst was likely to occur. Though the wychlaren venerated the Shield as a well-placed outpost from which to guard Rashemen's borders, there was another power to the Shield that was a secret even among their numbers.

Fire and Narfell may have broken the city, but ice and what lay in the Shield, unnamed, had destroyed it.

He stared after Thaena, wondering how he might gain her trust. He imagined possible conversations full of explanations

and memories of their old friendship. To gain her trust again might mean the difference between life and death for the fang. In his heart though, he wanted her to look upon him as she once had, to see understanding in eyes that time lost had forged into an almost mythical beauty. His pace quickened slightly. For so long he had discounted the thought that he might be in love with her as the fantasy of a young boy, or the foolish musings of a man out of touch with reality. But if she could be made to see him as he truly was...

Shaking his head, he smirked, intrigued to find those longings still alive and well within him. Since the trial he had foregone hope of anything meaningful in Rashemen, and he kept his focus on a new life in exile. The life of a

criminal.
Though no solid evidence linked him to Keffrass's death, he had felt the rage cast flames through his hands, found the dying body, smelled the smoke and burned flesh. The staff, wordlessly handed to him, bore the scar of his guilt.
And the scrolls of Shandaular... missing, or had he destroyed them?
Slogging through the snow, he pulled his cloak tight around him. Lost time rested on his shoulders like a perching dragon, the coils of its long tail squeezing his chest and silencing his futile protests. He could almost feel Syrolf's breath on the back of his neck, and he increased his speed again, pushing through the snow.
+
chapter Flue
called themselves the Swords of the Cold Road, warriors of various nationalities who'd drifted to the Great Dale and Narfell to find bloody work on the trade road running north and south through both lands. Bastun stood waiting for some treachery to be unveiled by the durthan and her twenty-odd henchmen as the two groups met outside a half-destroyed temple to an unknown deity. The Ice Wolf fang kept to themselves, staring down Anilya's sellswords as Anilya and her men approached quietly, weapons sheathed and packs ready for travel.
Bastun wished they would do something obvious to justify his suspicion. The fact that they took half the road as agreed by Thaena and Anilya, trading only a few threatening stares with the Rashemi, unnerved Bastun even more. The fang who wished nothing but to be rid of him were on his right and a band of lawless cutthroats on his left. In the center, he trudged along.
Moving carefully through the ruins, they took several alternate paths to avoid possible ambush points. It was not long before they reached the edge of the first wall, the original defensive wall of a young Shandaular. The chill that

Bastun detected as he passed beyond the rubble of that wall crackled in the Weave—and it had little to do with winter.

Few buildings could be seen in the destruction that greeted them in the inner city. Bare foundations lay cracked and half-buried by crumbling stone. Architectural style was lost to the ravages of war and time. Trapped in the ice were bits of bone, hair, and scraps of cloth. Shandaular here was a maze of winding streets, piles of rubble, and the occasional discernable structure that had somehow survived and been left to stand as mute testament to a past that had once been civilized.

Ancient maps of the vremyonni, held together only by cantrips and wishful thinking, laid themselves out in Bastun's mind. He reconstructed street corners and old fountains in his head as they wound steadily northeast past the worst of the ruin.

The feel of fragile parchment between his fingers had been one of the quiet joys of his life among the vremyonni—though many of those scrolls and maps had been stolen less than a tenday previous. Syrolf had noted their theft among Bastun's list of crimes, but truly he had no need to steal them. Keffrass had been one of the first to examine Shandaular and the Shield and had taught Bastun as much as he had wanted to learn.

He wished Keffrass were here now, though were that possible Bastun would have had no reason to come—at least, not as soon perhaps. The Shield had its secrets, secrets Keffrass had long protected and only after many years had passed on to Bastun.

The night of the theft and the murder seemed a lifetime away.

The fog thickened and progress slowed. Runners moved back and forth between Thaena and the lead warriors, taking directions and making reports. "Strange movement in the fog," they reported, and at least one scout's face was as white as the snow when she spoke with Duras. Bastun closed

his eyes briefly and whispered a word of command, activating magic embedded in his mask to witness any manipulation of the Weave in the vicinity. When he opened his eyes again he gasped.

A ripple of energy flowed around them, swirling with the fog and forming into shapes that glowed dully with magic. Faces and dim silhouettes streamed past them, crowds of spirits rushing along in a silent drama. As Bastun maintained the spell, the visions grew more intense. Dull colors of blue and black trailed behind the spirits as they appeared beside him and ran through those in front of him. He could make out a whisper of sound, snippets of an ancient language in a dialect he did not understand, and faint screams of anguish echoed in his ears as if from far away. The ghosts of fallen Shandaular.

Once again, as before when they'd first made landfall, Bastun detected a strange pattern in the sounds. Something was missing, like hearing only one side of a conversation or every other note of a familiar song. He focused on the gaps, trying to fill in what could have been taken away, but to no avail. Letting the spell fade, he shook his head as the mundane world returned in the glimmer of distant torches and tumbling snowflakes. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to make out those spirits in normal sight, but they were invisible. Their mystery troubled him—the ghosts of Shandaular weren't a topic the scrolls detailed. They had been either overlooked, or it was something new.

A Rashemi runner came again, and the ethran raised her hand and called for a stop. After consulting with Thaena he returned to the front. Anilya stopped her own band and stood by while Thaena spoke with Duras.

"There is a large structure up ahead and what looks to be a clear road to the Shield's gates," she told the warrior. "We should scout for any threats before approaching the castle."

"Agreed," Duras said, and motioned towards Bastun. "Syrolf! You're with me."

Bastun let out the breath he'd almost replied with and watched as Syrolf reluctantly turned over his guard to the other warriors. The pair disappeared into the fog.
Anilya conferred with Ohriman, drawing a cautious stare from Bastun. Thaena stood on the north side of the road at the base of a ruined wall, and the vremyonni saw his chance to speak with her about his concerns. Glancing at the others, he made his way in as non-threatening a manner as he could manage. He was watched carefully but not stopped by his guards—their distaste for him apparently not as motivated as SyrolFs.
"Ethran," he said, "may I have a word?"
She nodded, but her eyes remained on the curving path ahead where Duras had gone. Bastun leaned against the wall beside Thaena, choosing his words carefully before speaking. Secrets and difficult subjects seemed to be gathering in crowds since they'd arrived in Shandaular, and words were only complicating matters further.
"I wanted to speak of Anilya," he said. "Her presence here—"
"Is a threat?" she replied, then looked at him. "Yes. I am aware of the threats that surround me."
He read her meaningful glance and decided to push the subject further and gauge her response. There was power in knowledge, and he needed to know how much power she had.
"And the Shield?" he asked.
"The Shield? Do you consider the Shield itself a threat?"
"That depends," he answered, though his thoughts swirled with the answer she had truly given him: that she did not know the secrets of Shandaular—and that he was far more alone than he suspected. Looking at her he wondered what her memory of him had become. "Am I to be executed when we reach the Shield?"
For the briefest of moments he saw a glimmer of softness in the eyes behind her mask, a hint of caring that made him feel human again, but she looked away. The hardness in her

voice betrayed the glance when she answered.
"The othlor have not passed any sentence upon you," she said. "This journey—this final journey—was at your request. The only danger you face, that any of us face, is the Nar and whatever they hope to accomplish here."
"And the durthan," Bastun said, motioning toward Anilya and Ohriman.
"Yes. The durthan as well," she said quietly, studying the woman who would have been her sworn enemy under normal circumstances.
Bastun took a breath and said directly what she had not. "And me."
She made no show that she had heard him at all. Her eyes remained fixed on Anilya until the durthan returned the stare, then Thaena looked down and returned to her watch for Duras.
"Yes," she finally whispered. "You too."
Time crawled as they waited for the scouts to return. The wind picked up, stirring the falling snow into a dance of whirling particles in the torchlight. Anilya stood impatiently across the road, looking between Thaena and the direction of the Rashemi scouts. Her warriors grumbled and paced, bundled in heavy cloaks. Ohriman sat crouched in the snow, wearing only his light armor and plain clothing beneath. He did not shiver or show any sign that the chill affected him. He made even the stoic Rashemi look frozen by comparison. Smirking, he winked a catlike eye at Bastun and rubbed quickly melting snow between his bare hands.
Bastun had met with and studied beings that had been touched by fiendish blood, commonly called tieflings. Ohriman's ancestry was intriguing in a scholarly sense, but something in the sellsword's eye, the tiny glint of nearby torches, a gleam of cruelty or amusement—or both—troubled Bastun deeply.
Unflinching under Ohriman's scrutiny, Bastun almost missed the faint sound of voices hiding in the wind. Listening

carefully, he made out speakers, distant and indiscernible, but
different than those of the city's spirits. In a pause between gusts, the faint ringing of steel on steel clattered and echoed down the path. Both groups stopped their pacing and conversations, taking in the noise and looking to Thaena. The ethran's reaction was swift and decisive.
"Quickly! Move!" she shouted, a command echoed by Anilya to her own troop.
The fang surged forward into the mist, followed by the sellswords. Thaena, Bastun, and Anilya fell in behind the warriors, running sure-footed through the snow. The voices and sounds of battle grew louder as they wound through the ruins, echoing as if from a cavern. Voices of pain and anguish mingled with those sounds, cries of suffering unlike anything Bastun had ever heard before. Turning a wide corner, the edges of a large circle of destroyed buildings came into view, and he surmised their location with dawning horror.
Here in the center of Shandaular, down curving stairways to a blackened stone square, lay the origins of the entire city and the reason for its destruction—the Hall of the Portal. They ran down the steps, eyeing the fallen columns and piles of rubble that lined the curved walls of the Hall. Bastun had studied the vague references about what lay inside—and the warnings about approaching the site after sunset. Flickering light painted the stone in shades of blue and green. Dancing shadows on the wall followed the forms of Duras, Syrolf, and the warriors they led as well as the gruesome shapes of their foes.
Clawlike hands scratched and tore at the Rashemi, batting away their swords and hurling grown men through the air to crash against the walls. Eyes that were little more than black pools of viscous, dripping tears dominated their sunken faces. Armor hung loosely on their bodies, rusted and split by time. Their age-worn tabards bore the faded insignia of

the Nentyarch of Dun-Tharos, the first ruler of ancient Narfell—a
black tree, stripped of leaves on a circular red field—soldiers cursed to suffer alongside the people they slaughtered as the city burned and the Shield was breached.
The creatures wailed and cried with monstrous voices. Only a dozen opposed the fang, but their inhuman strength more than made up for their numbers.
The fang negotiated the cracked and rubble-strewn floors without hesitation, roaring eagerly into battle against foes thankfully more substantial than the city's spirits. Anilya's sellswords paled at the sight of the enemy, overtaken by the wracking sobs and groans that echoed within the hall. Several of the sellswords fell to their knees and rolled on their sides, clutching their ears and weeping uncontrollably. The others, led by Ohriman, followed the fang into the fight.
Bastun stopped just outside, staring at the eldritch glow that swirled and spat in the hall's center. A maelstrom of energy where no magic should have been left now haloed a blackened patch of ground, once covered by the archway of Shandaular's portal. The archway itself was shattered, destroyed long ago by King Arkaius, but the fragments glowed with power in defiance of all reason. Bastun nearly fell to his knees as the keening wail of the undead filled his ears. The voices of Duras and Syrolf stood out in the cacophony of sound, shouting in some unknown language that drew Bastun out of his sudden stupor.
Clutching his staff Bastun half-slid down into the chamber, his eyes on the portal and his mind fighting the pull of the undead's despair. A warrior screamed in pain and fell back from the fray, his arm steaming and covered in a black smear of the creatures' tears. Bastun stepped over the man and continued on.
Anilya hurled bolts of flame, and the undead screamed and wailed even louder. She screamed right back at them as she summoned her spells, her Rashemi spirit evident as she

continued her assault.
Thaena's staff flashed scarlet, ruining the claws of one creature, then spinning to sweep it off balance. Her casting was lost to Bastun as he neared the portal, voices streaming from the unnatural vortex. Though spoken in a dialect he did not know, the language sounded vaguely of Nar origins, a version unheard for nearly two millennia.
A berserker was pushed into him and they tumbled to the ground. An undead soldier moaned as it knelt over them with arms outstretched. Intoning a quick command, Bastun shoved his staff forward into the thing's chest, producing a burst of blue light that knocked the wheep off its feet. It scrabbled and screamed as it sought to regain its footing again.
Sitting up, Bastun met the glazed eyes of Syrolf, who seemed not to recognize him at all. An odd light in SyrolPs eyes turned in rhythm to the spinning power of the portal. The warrior muttered something in Old Nar and returned to the fight. Bastun understood the words "protect" and "portal," then Syrolf was lost in the battle.
Standing, Bastun ran to the edge of the portal circle and searched for some idea of how to stop the wild magic of the broken stones. The symbols and runes on the shattered archway were unlike any that he had ever seen before. They glowed with a flickering green-hued light that stung his eyes. Looking up, he squinted and tried to make sense of what he witnessed in the depths of the spinning energy.
A mass of figures pushed and strained against the edges of the vortex, their faces contorted in madness and pain. A constant stream of babbling escaped their lips. Bastun took a step backward, the noise in the chamber coming into focus. The shouts, cries, and screams of pain mixed with the clash of steel, the smell of smoke, and shadows dancing on broken stone walls. Shandaular, the City of Weeping Ghosts, did not bemoan the fate that once befell it—it relived every moment of it.

Bastun returned his focus to the portal stones. He knelt and studied the magic written by a cursed race in the deep history of Faerun. He did not understand the language of the symbols, but there was a sense of a familiar order in certain places. Searching among the runes for some pattern, he pushed away the thought that he was wasting his time. Instinct had drawn him to the portal. Intellect would be forced to solve it.

A fang warrior crashed to the ground beside him and was knocked unconscious by the fall. Growling in frustration, Bastun turned and prepared to defend himself against the undead soldier. He paused as a green light burst in the soldier's chest, eating away at the armor and dried flesh beneath until the creature collapsed into a pile of dust. Anilya stood nearby, her hand still glowing with the timely spell.

She strode forward, glancing at the portal and the vortex above it. Behind her the battle shifted as more of the undead tore themselves from the ice and snow and dug their way into the fight.

"Can you stop it, vremyonni?" Anilya asked.

"I can try," he said, "but I make no promises."

"Good enough," she said and turned to face the hall of raging Rashemi and undead soldiers. Ohriman dashed to her sideI and slashed at a pair of shriveled arms breaking free beneath his feet. Wielding a wand of pale green wood, Anilya shouted over her shoulder to Bastun, "Do what you can! We will try to give you time!"

Lacking the time to question the good sense in trusting a durthan, Bastun turned back to the portal and began to trace patterns through the runes. He shook his head as possibilities came and went, discarding one idea after another. The pages of spellbooks flipped through his mind, turning and turning as he tried to find a weakness in the dense net of magic that flowed among the portal's spells.

The others struggled against the tide of undead soldiers and

made slow progress, though the strange look in Syrolf s eye haunted Bastun's sense of hope. The smell of burning
bone wafted from the steaming remains of another of Anilya's targets, her wand flashing a bright emerald light every few moments.
Growling in frustration, Bastun chose. His fingertips brushed the edges of one rune as he reached for another. He whispered arcane names, quickly trying to identify the symbols even as he called upon their power. For a moment, between the cracks and the squirming magic, he saw a pattern. His eyes widened, seizing upon the two runes he had chosen and managing the last syllables of their names before his breath was stolen from him.
+ + + + +
I369 DR, Year of the Gauntlet "Where is your breath?"
Keffrass's voice whispered in Bastun's ear as he concentrated. Sweat beaded on his forehead, rolled into his eyes, and dripped from his chin. Magic filled his limbs, granting him power—raw power. It was his to master, to control lest it break free. His will and his rage warred inside of him, defying his training and calling upon him to be free, to destroy.
Slowly, he inhaled, shuddering and shaking, his eyes trying to focus on a delicate glass object resting on the floor within a chalk circle several paces away.
"There," Keffrass said, pacing behind him. The vremyonni taught secrets of magic that even the wychlaren did not use, destructive spells forbidden among the wilds of Rashemen. They felt it necessary to push the limits of their knowledge into dangerous places, for one never knew when such secrets might be needed. "Master your breathing, will your pulse to deliver only what the body needs. Keep the mind free. Make a place within yourself to hide from the ravages of anger. Divide your
flesh from your mind, but control both as instruments of your will. Now speak the words."

Bastun spat, his lips trembling. Pain arced through his body, filling his arms and flooding down to his legs. His fingertips glowed and he gritted his teeth, forcing the magic to subside, to obey his will. He smiled as it did so, tensing his body as if for battle, though his mind cleared as the spell worked its way to his tongue and issued from his lips.

The glass sculpture rose sharply into the air, spinning wildly. Exhaling carefully, Bastun stopped its motion by degrees until it floated calmly at eye level. It drifted to the right, Bastun's every breath a matter of pure control as the magic spent itself from him. Bastun directed it to sit within a second circle. The sculpture landed silently and he released it from his control.

The power fled from his limbs, the Weave reforming itself into natural patterns as he fell to his knees, lightheaded and smiling again.

"Good," Keffrass said, then added, "Always remember your breathing, your focus. Master the breath ,and control the word."

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Power surged through Bastun's body, leaching from the portal and skewing his senses. The voices of those in the vortex crowded his thoughts, pressing and shoving to be noticed, to be granted mercy from their torment. Twisting his eyes away from their sickly light he saw the battle flowing around him. Time slowed and showed him the faint outlines of warring spirits, some intertwined with the fang, the proximity of the phantoms' bloodlust infecting Duras and shining in SyrolPs eyes.

Pain flared in Bastun's head and he shut his eyes, unable to grasp at the strands of magic that held him. The voices, those

trapped for centuries, tore at his focus and foiled his attempts at control. The ruined portal could likely never be what it once was, but the magic of those who crafted it would endure. He choked in its grip.

Where is your breath?

The memory of his master's voice forced his eyes open. Slowly he inhaled and touched upon the wild stirrings of the rage within him. The maddened voices faded. He pulled away from the stones, his hands still clinging to the runes. The pattern flickered before him. He could not break it, but he struggled to disrupt it. His body hummed with energy as he exhaled, whispering a spell of disenchantment.

At the last word pain flared, and he was thrown from the portal stones and slammed on his back. He lay there, measuring his breathing, power still vibrating beneath his skin. Taking up his staff, he watched the runes waver once, but their light resumed unabated. He gaped in frustration, gripping the staff with white knuckles as he turned to the battle.

Frustration and the sudden need to fight filled him. They were not disappointed. One of the sobbing undead charged him from the right. The axe blade screeched from his staff, and he slashed at the thing's dripping eyes. It stumbled backward, the sockets of its eyes now joined by a deep wound through its face. It came on still, shrieking as it swiped at his arm. Its bony fingers tore through his robes and skin, the injury burning as the claw drew back to strike again.

Ignoring the wound, Bastun slashed, nearly severing the creature's arm at the wrist. Before the undead could recover Bastun summoned a quick spell. The words flew across his tongue and a wave of energy pulsed from his open palm. Struck by the spell, the soldier faltered and stumbled backward. The wheep's lifeforce chilled Bastun's flesh as it drained into him, its eyes ceasing their constant stream of black tears. A single moan escaped the thing before it collapsed and lay still.

Anilya passed him, nodding her approval as he turned to face the next undead.

Falling back to call upon another spell, Bastun paused as a

wavering sound caught his attention. A ripple of power flashed through the room, silencing all but the wails of the spirits trapped in the portal. The undead soldiers stopped fighting, facing the maelstrom of energy above the portal and whimpering as it began to fade. The fang took advantage of the pause and hacked the soldiers to the ground. Their inhuman cries grew weaker as the portal's glow flickered several times and went dark.

Duras shook his head. The strange light disappeared from Syrolf s eyes. Dazed, the other scouts all fell to the ground. Bastun exhaled and dismissed the axe-blade from his staff, feeling every muscle scream for immediate rest. He gazed in wonder at the portal, dormant once again.

As the last of the undead were left in pieces on the ground, several Rashemi howled in victory. Ohriman and his sellswords celebrated less vocally and found places to sit and rest their weary sword arms. Thaena attended to the wounded, and no one acknowledged the lone vremyonni or his efforts in their victory.

Bastun sat near the shattered blocks of the portal archway and studied the relic and the unfamiliar magic carved in its surface. The portal was to have been the ancient Nentyarch s prize, a gateway to the far south and expansion of the empire, but this portal was only a shadow of that which Shandaular had contained. The roots of the city's destruction lay in the shattered portal's dark elven runes, yet the full purpose to which they had been put, the scrolls had hinted, still lay ahead of him, within the Shield's defenses.

The rustle of robes behind him disturbed his thoughts. Turning, he found Anilya regarding him coolly from behind her dark mask—not the mask he had hoped to see. He sighed at his own foolishness, once again happy for his own mask and the emotions it hid.

The durthan crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"Yes?" he asked, wondering what she was thinking.

"Well done, vremyonni," she answered and winked at him before turning away to join Ohriman and her men.
Bastun resumed his study of the portal stones and tried to appear nonplussed by the durthans attention.
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(jrunts of Pam echoed softly in the hall as the warriors bound their wounds with strips of cloth or leather. Thaena saw to a few of them, but mostly they worked on their own injuries, leaving the ethran to speak words of peace for the spirits of three warriors who had fallen to the weeping undead. She prayed that they might find their way home and strengthen Rashemen in death just as they had in life. The traditional benediction felt awkward within the cursed city.
The others sat by and told tales of the warriors' lives, honoring their memories in the tradition of the berserkers. Duras stared hard at the bodies of men he had led into death. Bastun stayed close to the portal, away from the others, but listening closely and respecting the warriors' sacrifice in his own way.
Though weary, Bastun could not force his eyes away from the broken archway. He had tried several times to unravel small bits of the old runes, to decipher their meaning, but their makers had worked the spells in a time of old and secret magic.
With the vremyonni, he had studied what little history had been available about the Ilythiiri, an ancient nation of elves lost to their own power millennia ago. Though the Ilythiiri had left the surface of the world, bits of their sorcery still remained in places like Shandaular. The shattered portal, like all the city's
dead, had little resemblance to what it had been in life, yet in death it had also refused to lay quiet.
Fearful of surrounding enemies and the growing darkness in the western forests, King Arkaius had used knowledge gleaned from the Ilythiiri runes for his own ends. Just as a

city had grown around the portal, Bastun feared others might also gather around the table of time to steal scraps they neither earned nor fully understood.
From the corner of his eye Bastun noticed Anilya watching him. Her interest in the portal was no mystery. A durthan could always be counted on to seek out possible power or advantage over the wychlaren, but the way she studied him was unnerving. Closing his eyes, he shut out the world, alone behind his mask and preparing himself for the last trek to the Shield. There he would find more of the Ilythiiri runes, twisted by a desperate king, and he hoped time had molested them with naught but dust and ice.
Hearing footsteps approaching from behind, Bastun sighed and opened his eyes. Syrolf knelt beside him with a cold look on his runescarred features.
"What are you doing, exile?" he said, his eyes narrow. "Covering your tracks?"
Bastun took a deep breath. "I am trying to discover what happened here and why," he said evenly.
"Ah, I see," the warrior nodded then smiled conspiratorially. "So it wasn't you I saw, here, in this spot, commanding these stones?"
"I managed to stop them, yes," Bastun replied as Syrolf stood and looked down at him.
"Interesting, that," the warrior said as he paced alongside the portal. "You knew just what to do, didn't you? Came to where you'd be needed."
Bastun stood, staff in hand, breathing measured. Syrolf's suspicions were tiresome, and Bastun had no desire to justify them.
"I followed my instincts," he said, realizing that though he kept his hands to himself, his sharp tongue was bound to do just as much damage. "I followed them toward the spells that I could do something about. I didn't think to try bashing away at the dried-out corpses protecting it. How did that work out? You didn't seem quite yourself when we ran into

each other."
"Men died in that battle, exile!" Syrolf stepped closer, shoulders squared and jaw clenched. "You would dare disrespect them?"
"No," Bastun answered, matching the warrior's stance. "Not them, just—"
"Syrolf!" Duras interrupted, placing a long arm across the runescarred warrior's chest to separate the pair. "Stand down. I'll leave no more dead here than have already fallen."
"He mocks our dead!" Syrolf fumed, a murderous glint in his eye. His raised voice echoed through the chamber, drawing the attentions of everyone to the argument. "We bleed for a traitor and he uses us for his own ends!"
Syrolf's hand strayed dangerously close to the sheathed sword at his side as he pushed into Duras's outstretched arm.
"You have no right in this Syrolf," Duras said, struggling to keep the warrior back. "You would disobey the ethran? Do not be a fool! Stand down!"
Thaena approached, watching the conflict coolly. Bastun had no intention of fighting Syrolf, but he would not back down. He would defend himself if necessary. As it was few trusted him, but any show of weakness among the Rashemi would only add to his troubles.
"Lack of evidence has been a convenient problem, hasn't it?" Syrolf said and looked at Bastun. "The exile has been surrounded by evidence ever since and before his trial! Nothing good enough to show him for what he is. Now he manipulates this ruin against us, and we are to do nothing?"
"Bastun stopped the portal," Anilya said coldly, standing nearby, her hands folded neatly before her as she stared down the warrior, "and probably saved your life."
Syrolf chuckled low in his throat and swept his gaze across the rest of the fang.
"The durthan speaks for the exile," he said, smiling. "How many among us are surprised at that? A show of hands will

do."
The fang shifted and mumbled to one another, none raising their hands, but many nodding their heads in agreement. Thaena approached closer as Duras pushed Syrolf back a pace.
"Syrolf," the ethran said calmly, "let's say I believe you over the durthan. Are you prepared to die in Bastun's place?"
Indignation filled Syrolf's eyes at the question. "Lady Ethran, he is not—"
"If Bastun is guilty as you say, then the hathran will deal with him," Thaena said. "Until he is brought to the Shield and officially declared an exile, he is still vremyonni and only a hathran or an othlor may formally execute a traitorous vremyonni. If he is dead when we arrive, the hathran will demand your sword for his life."
Even the status of a runescarred berserker could not save Syrolf from the judgment of the hathran. If one of the wychlaren demanded the sword of a berserker, that sword would be returned quickly. Point first. To his credit, Syrolf seemed to be weighing the price of his own sacrifice.
He raised his hands slowly, though his eyes stared daggers into Bastun's. He pushed by Duras, passing between him and the vremyonni. He paused.
"The Nar, these Creel, are here because of him," the warrior said. "We were attacked by the rusalka on the lake, because of him. Now here he summons the dead to be free of us. No good can come of this."
"It's over, Syrolf," Duras said. "Let it be."
Syrolf did not answer, but his left hand gripped the handle of his long sword. Bastun tensed, spells reflexively readying themselves at his fingertips at the first glimmer of steel at Syrolf's side. The runescarred warrior froze, unable to carry out whatever he might have been intending, before the edge of a thin blade appeared at his throat.
Ohriman smirked at the surprised Syrolf, amusement glinting in the tiefling's catlike stare as he pressed his sword

against the warrior's neck.
Thaena's eyes widened, and the rest of the fang drew swords, ready to pounce now that one of their own was threatened. Anilya's men seemed not to have moved at all, but Bastun could see hands on their weapons and legs bending slowly into positions more suitable for standing at a moment's notice.
"Ohriman!" Anilya shouted. "What are you thinking?"
"You seem very quick to accuse the wizard, Rashemi," Ohriman sneered, his voice low and threatening. "Leave him be."
"Put that blade down, outlander," Thaena said, leveling her gaze on the tiefling.
"There's no law stopping my blade, Rashemi," he said, ignoring Thaena. "Remember that."
"Put it down!"
"Order your own men, ethran," Anilya said. "Ohriman is just trying to protect the one man who might know what's happening in this city."
"By killing one of our own?" Duras said. "I'll not have any of that!"
Syrolf and Ohriman stared death into one another's eyes as the others argued. Bastun saw the situation deteriorating rapidly, ripples of chaos spreading through the two groups with each threatening word. Syrolf glanced back and forth between Ohriman, Bastun, and the others.
"You see, Syrolf," Basan said, "no one wins here. You kill me, Ohriman kills you, and then everyone tries to kill each other."
"You planned this," Syrolf said. "Turning us against one another!"
"I'm not the one holding the sword," Bastun said, flexing his fingers and feeling the Weave around him ready to respond. The Shield was close enough now that he might elude the conflict and reach it alone. At the moment, he would readily abandon them all.

Syrolf released the grip on his sword, and Ohriman slowly pulled his blade away from the Rashemi's neck. The arguments fell silent as the pair faced one another.
Syrolf took a step backward and turned as Ohriman made to sheath his sword. As soon as the mercenary's hilt touched scabbard, the berserker spun, drawing his sword against the tiefling. In the blink of an eye, Ohriman's blade appeared and blocked the attack, their steel singing as it met and held between them.
Their arms strained and pushed. SyrolPs lip curled as he found the wiry mercenary's strength to be far more than expected.
Ohriman's demeanor remained calm. Bastun swore the man looked as if he could have yawned at any moment. The others stood still, waiting to see if blood would be drawn between the two—there were no wychlaren laws to protect the tiefling. Despite his dislike of Syrolf, Bastun hoped Ohriman would lose. If Syrolf fell, the entire fang might rush to avenge his death.
With a final shove the pair parted. Syrolf merely grunted and turned away. Ohriman walked back to his men and gracefully sat down, drying the condensing mist from his blade with his cloak. Duras stood in SyrolPs path and grabbed his cloak roughly, batting the sword from his hand.
"Get some rest," he said angrily and pushed Syrolf to the ground. "We'll discuss this later."
Syrolf glared and leaned against a block of stone. Another warrior passed him a skin of watered-down jhuild, the infamous Rashemi firewine, with a pat on his shoulder. Syrolf drank
slowly, wincing only slightly at Thaena's whisper of admonishment as she passed. Glancing once more in Bastun's direction, he looked away and stared at the ground, seething.
Silence returned to the hall, and both groups settled back in their places. Thaena prepared her spell components, while

Duras maintained a close eye on Syrolf, who paid no mind to anything but the wineskin in his hand.
Shaking his head, Bastun resumed his place beside the portal, more comfortable with a puzzle of destructive magic than trying to figure out his fellow mortals.
Duras came to sit by him, wrapped in his cloak and sighing as he rested his legs.
"That was... bracing," he said quietly, his eyes drifting to Syrolf and Ohriman.
"No blood spilled," Bastun answered, still unsure of how to act around the warrior. "Well, not yet at any rate. How long do you suspect this truce will hold?"
"That depends." Duras raised an eyebrow as he considered the question. "Mostly on how much opposition we'll face at the Shield. And I say the more the merrier for this band."
"Common enemies," Bastun said, nodding.
"It does tend to keep the swords side by side," Duras replied.
Bastun recalled his vision of the phantoms surrounding the fang as they fought the weeping undead, their ghostly blades blurring alongside Rashemi steel.
"When you were fighting those things, did you... feel anything strange?" Bastun asked, unsure if what he'd seen was even real.
"Something." The warrior closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. "There was something—terribly cold. And a memory, as if I'd been here before, fighting the same battle. Does that make any sense?"
"Perhaps," Bastun replied, biting his lip and caressing the edges of a cracked rune in the portal. "I thought I saw something."
In truth Duras's memory meant far more to Bastun than he cared to say within earshot of the durthan and her lackey.
"I wouldn't have let Syrolf kill you," Duras said, interrupting the vremyonni's thoughts. "I want you to know that."
"Well," Bastun replied, looking around the hall and taking in the odd stare or two from the fang and the sellswords alike.

Thaena kept to herself and had made no move toward the pair. "That makes two of us."
Duras smiled and glanced back at the durthan and Ohriman. "Was Anilya right in what she said? Do you know what's happening here?"
"Not really." It was a safe lie, avoiding the fact that he couldn't truly know for sure. "Though I doubt we've seen the last of the Creel. In fact I suspect the durthan was telling the truth about what she saw before meeting us."
"Truly?" Duras raised an eyebrow. "Humph, then what is she lying about, I wonder?"
Bastun looked toward the durthan, who had ceased staring at him, and wondered at her true motives. She could not have known he knew anything about Shandaular, unless she was merely basing her guess on his luck with stopping the portal. It was common knowledge that the vremyonni had studied the city long before the Shield outpost was established by the wychlaren. However, Bastun was far too young to have been among those scholars. Bastun continued puzzling over the matter as the two groups rested in silence, waiting for Thaena to give the order to march.
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The ethran seemed to need no rest at all. She produced healing salves for the more seriously wounded among the fang and then paced in front of the hall's entrance. Bastun found moments of rest here and there, not really exhausted so much as trying not to appear impatient.
This became all the harder when the voices returned outside.
Scattered at first, he heard them swiftly gathering. He recalled the black tide of souls that had swept through the Creel earlier and imagined the waves of darkness rising in the streets. Slowly the others began to hear the voices as well, and Thaena clapped her hands together once to gain everyone's attention, the nearness of the spirits giving her an immediate audience.

Words were unnecessary as the fang stood at the ready. Anilya roused her men as well and joined Thaena at the entrance. Duras took his place at the head of the fang. The vremyonni took one last look at the broken pieces of Shandaular's portal, trying to hold the image of the Ilythiiri runes in his mind, then made his way toward the others.
"How far to the Shield, Duras?" Thaena asked.
"Less than a mile, directly south," he answered.
"We'll need to be quick," Anilya added as the howling darkness outside grew louder.
"Indeed," Thaena said. "Same marching order as before. We'll run the distance to the gates and hope the spirits don't follow too closely. Understood?"
"Yes, ethran," Duras replied without hesitation, eliciting nods of approval and boastful assurances from the rest of the fang.
"And if they do follow?" Anilya asked.
Thaena gave the durthan a half-lidded stare through her mask, tilting her head as she answered matter-of-factly. "Then we stand and die fighting, as Rashemi should."
The ethran stepped outside. Dawn was still a ways away as the two groups exited the chamber, but clouds heavy with snow and the thick fog eclipsed the pale light of sunrise. Bastun hovered a moment at the rear, looking around the corner of the hall's curving exterior. The mist made everything a dim
silhouette, and walls seemed to melt into blackness as the spirits moved through and around them like a spreading flame. Every tortured voice, every wail felt directed at him, grabbing his heart and pounding it harder. Still, he could not look away. Scents of smoke and burning flesh reached his nose. Like ghosts themselves the smells tugged at the primal urge to flee.
A shout from Duras broke his bondage, and he quickly took his place as the group began a steady charge ahead of the spirits. The Rashemi ran, focused only on reaching their

destination, but Bastun noted the looks of panic among the sellswords as the sound of the wailing shadows became screeches of frustration and inhuman desire. Only Ohriman maintained his stride and composure.
Chancing a look over his shoulder, Bastun could see where the Hall of the Portal had been. The advancing spirits had overcome it. Bastun searched through the fog ahead for the first glimpse of the Shield's gates. It felt like an eternity, the limited visibility making progress unfathomable.
Lightning flashed through the clouds, lighting up the fog. Catching movement from out of the corner of his eye, Bastun saw a narrow alley flooding with shadows. Ephemeral arms stretched out for the warmth of the living, and pale patches of light bobbed in pairs through the mass.
"Beware the west!" Duras yelled.
Muted thunder mumbled in the wake of the lightning as the group edged away from the western side of the road, jumping over broken bits of wall and other structures protruding from the snow. More spirits tumbled into the street and merged with the moaning army of ghosts. Bastun pumped his legs harder, eyes focused on the path ahead of him.
"The east!" Anilya cried as the windows of a standing wall bled forth yet another stream of shadows.
Order dissolved as the shadows flanked them and closed in. The fang shouted, some challenging the shadows to catch them.
Lightning ripped through the sky again, spreading through the snow and clouds and unnatural fog. Amidst the clouds, in the heartbeat in which they were lit, Bastun saw shapes diving and banking on shadowy wings. Shandaular was coming to life all around them. More corporeal things stumbled into view as they passed.
Thunder followed. A scream echoed in the thunder's wake. One of Anilya's sellswords had lagged behind, slowed by a wounded ankle. Tendrils of the darkness pulled him down

into the snow. He shrieked for help, but there was no help to be had. His cries did not last long, and they strengthened those still running.

Death rode on their heels, and Bastun's lungs burned with the effort of maintaining his stride. He felt relief as the high towers of the Shield became visible through the fog, although he feared what they might find inside. The mournful wail of the dead rose in pitch as the group crossed the last stretch of ground into the shadow of the Shield's outer wall. The sound was deafening as the dead reached the border of their territory, a line that they would not cross, many retreating even within sight of the massive fortress.

Warriors hit the wall and slid to the ground, smiling grimly as they fought to catch their breath. The Rashemi greeted those behind them as if they'd just finished a casual race. Bastun slumped to his knees at the large wooden gates and leaned on his hands, breathing heavily. Though thankful that the dead outside still held a healthy fear of the Shield, he knew from Keffrass's cryptic remarks that the spirits within the fortress were far more dangerous. When pressed for specifics, the old vremyonni would stare off into space for long moments, remembering, before shaking his head and changing the subject.

The shadows left behind melted among the ruins, their voices quieter but no less disquieting.

The gates were open slightly, just enough to allow one to pass through, and Bastun stood to peer in at the ancient castle. Thaena and Duras came to look as well, and Bastun wondered
if they had any idea of what they were truly seeing.

The tops of its high walls and multiple towers were lost in the low clouds, their surfaces remarkably untouched by times ravages, as if the citadel had been frozen and set aside. Bastun marveled at the magic that must have been used in its construction. Little decoration broke up the austere architecture save for the stylized archway above the

gate, made to resemble what the portal must have once looked like.
Stepping back, he leaned against the cold surface of the gate and slid down to his knees once again. He collected his thoughts and rested his head on his staff. The others were still calming down, some invigorated by the run through the streets and others already checking their weapons. The latter reminded him that the Creel would be waiting. He knew this in his gut. The lack of any Rashemi guards at the gate lent proof.
Spells came to mind on instinct, and he closed his eyes to inventory the arcane passages held in his memory. An undercurrent of rhythm flowed through his thoughts as he recalled the Firedawn Cycle as well, the tune resurfacing as he worried about the Shield's safety in the shadow of the fortress. The memory of Keffrass's voice echoed among his thoughts.
Where is your breath?
He cast a quick glance toward Anilya and Ohriman, careful to shield his eyes beneath hood and mask. They stood apart from the others, talking in whispers and watching him. He focused the magic of his mask to eavesdrop on their conversation even as pieces of the Cycle sang themselves in the back of his mind.
... to shake the stones, to break the bones Of the Shield and steal its Breath, Of the Shield and steal its Breath.
A grim smile spread across his lips as he heard everything but the voices of the durthan and Ohriman.
Secrets, secrets, he thought, everyone has a secret.
"So be it," he whispered and got back to his feet, surrounded by distrust and enemies, with more likely lying in wait just ahead. It had been a cold day when Keffrass had entrusted him with the secrets of Shandaular, and he couldn't have imagined the day he used them would be colder still.
Somewhere inside—still hidden and buried, he hoped—lay the folly of Shandaular's desperate king and the true cause

of the city's ruin.
He had to find the Shield's secret and ensure its safety.
He had to find its Breath.
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Ihe snow was smooth and unbroken, the wind light and silent. Even the mist thinned as they neared the Shield, giving Bastun a better view of their surroundings as the group made its careful way across the courtyard to a series of rising steps.
The fortress loomed over them, the tops of its towers lost in darkness. High walls bridged one tower to the next, curving the entire structure into a wide embrace of stone and ancient ice.
Keffrass's journals had contained sketches of what he had seen, his thoughts written with a mixture of fear and fascination. Before they'd been stolen along with several other scrolls and maps, Bastun had pored over them, devouring all that he could. The Shield's emptiness, abandoned corridors and silent battlements, had caught his imagination like nothing else he had studied. Standing in its shadow, he could understand his master's apprehension. Frozen in time, it stood in stark contrast to the ruined city surrounding it. He had the sense that it was watching them, bitter and unforgiving; it waited for them with all the patience of a dark mountain.
No guards came to greet or question them. No torches lit their way to the main doors. Each step drew them closer to a truth they dreaded to discover. Seeing no sign of the Creel—or
any other threat—only served to make them more wary.
At the base of the steps, Thaena called a halt, ordering two groups of warriors to scout east and west along the walls. Half the fang broke off to follow the command with several of the durthans sellswords joining them. They disappeared

into the mist, their footsteps through the snow muffled and then gone altogether.
"Do you think this wise, Thaena?" Duras whispered to the ethran. Bastun turned, trying to appear casual as he eavesdropped. "We face too many unknowns here."
"I think we have few choices," she answered, pacing away from the other warriors. "If we turn back, we leave the Shield to the Nar and the hathran to their mercies. Beyond that, we have the durthans presence to consider as well. She cannot be left here."
"The durthan we can deal with," Duras replied. "But you're right. We must see to the hathran first, though I must admit I —"
"I know," Thaena said, cutting him off. "A timely rescue seems less and less likely."
With that she turned, motioned for the others to follow, and began ascending the stairs.
Bastun waited several breaths for the scouts to return, though the size of the outer wall might keep them away for some time. Staring after Thaena, he took a deep breath and took to the steps, slick with a thin coat of snow-covered ice.
At the stairs' highest point, twin towers stood sentinel at the end of a large enclosure before the main doors, the gates between them long fallen to dust. Long walls bore ice-encrusted arrow slits angled downward. Bastun eyed those slits closely, imagining the slaughter that might have taken place had an army come to the Shield's doors unprepared. Unfortunately, only one army had ever been this close—and they had been well prepared.
The berserkers grumbled and glared at the high walls,
one of which had crumbled halfway down its length. The Rashemi did not care for such stonework and enclosed spaces, preferring the wilds of their homeland and simple lodgings close to the ground.
Their footsteps across the flagstones echoed dully as they neared the large double doors of the citadel. Thaena

gestured for Anilya to guard the enclosure's entrance with her sellswords. Judging by Syrolf's glare at Ohriman, it was yet another rare moment where he and the vremyonni agreed—Bastun did not care to have the durthan and her tiefling at his back.
The wind picked up slightly, whistling across the tops of the walls and spilling snow over the sides. Drifts had piled in front of the doors. As Thaena approached the entrance, the fang spread out with weapons drawn, each with an eye on their surroundings, the durthan, and Bastun. Turning away and narrowing his eyes, Bastun focused on his location, withdrawing into the curiosity of a scholar's mind that had served as an escape for so many years.
"What do you see, vremyonni?" Startled, he found Anilya studying the stonework of the nearby wall over his shoulder. "When you look at this place and all the time written into its stones, what do you see?"
She leaned forward, resting a hand on his arm as she examined the smooth contours of what might have once been a decorative carving, now worn to an indiscernible shape by centuries of exposure. Short, dark hair curled from beneath the edges of her mask, and he caught the scent ofwildflowers as she stood back. Suspicious, he remained silent and wasn't sure she even expected an answer to her strange question.
"Bastun."
He turned to see Thaena motioning for him to join her at the entrance. Anilya's hand fell away as she continued to observe the ancient walls with the casual grace of an experienced conspirator. Thankful for the interruption, Bastun quickly took his leave of the durthan and her cloying perfume.
"The doors," Thaena said. "I detect no wards upon them, but I sense something here that eludes my magic. Can you examine them as well?"
"Of course," he said. He glanced once again at the durthan

who had wandered back to stand with her men. Shaking his head slightly at what to him seemed the greater mystery—the durthan—he studied the doors for signs of disturbance. The wood was new, fashioned in Rashemen and set with large iron bracers, simple and unadorned.

A spell came to mind and he stepped into the drift before the doors in order to reach them. Before he could cast, his boot struck something solid in the snow. Cautiously, he prodded the drift with his staff, causing it to tumble away in clumps from the hidden object. His eyes widened as he pushed away more and more snow.

Glistening white hands and arms reached from the snow, preserved in the pose of their horrible final moments. Faces appeared as he brushed away the snow, each frozen in a screaming rictus, as if pleading with whatever had felled them to either spare them or let them die. Thaena stared at the bodies piled against the doors, then knelt to reach for a dropped necklace of bear claws and teeth. Each of the corpses bore a similar talisman, the trappings and clothing of Rashemi berserkers on each one.

"Bear Lodge," Duras whispered, though his voice thundered in the silence of the grisly scene.

"The hathran's fang," Thaena added, turning the necklace over her wrist.

"No surprise that," said Ohriman, the tiefling approaching nearby and observing the bodies with a disgusted sneer. "Setting up camp in a place like this, bound to find it a bit colder sooner or later."

"Hold your tongue, outlander," Duras growled, "or I'll hand it to you."

"These were Rashemi," Thaena said sternly, though her eyes never left the bodies. "They certainly did not freeze to death."

"I didn't mean to imply that they did, Lady Witch," Ohriman replied with a mocking bow, then added as he straightened, "Just that there's a reason most folk avoid Shandaular."

A dark patch on the eastern wall drew Bastun closer, sparking a memory. Kneeling, he avoided looking at the icy body of a young berserker, a man barely old enough to join the fang.

Brushing some snow away from the stone, Bastun found a darker substance mixed beneath it. Pulling his hand back, the familiar scent of brimstone filled him with alarm as he uncovered another sigil of ash, just like the ones that marred the wychlaren's path. A bone-numbing cold stole his voice and he doubled over in pain, rolling away from the wall and struggling to breathe. Once-sightless eyes blinked at him and rolled in their sockets, bits of ice falling away from a furrowing white brow as the dead man's jaw opened to issue a weak murmur of hunger.

The others backed away quickly, frost forming on their weapons as more of the bodies began to break the ice that surrounded them. Pale flesh cracked, gaping jaws closed, and waves of freezing cold reached out for the warmth of the living.

Thaena stumbled into Duras, breath steaming from behind her mask. Bastun scrambled backward on his hands as the dead pushed away from the wall and tried to rise.

"Bleakborn," he croaked, his throat raw and aching with cold. There were stories of outlanders lost to Rashemen's harsh winters, cursed to rise again by circumstance or vengeful spirit—or, he realized, by dying at the hands of another bleakborn.

He tried to call out, to warn the others, but his voice came as barely more than a whisper.

"No... flame," he managed though none could hear him. Some among the fang dropped weapons and cursed the growing frost on gloves and sword hilts. Thaena's voice rose above the others, chanting the beginnings of a spell that filled him with dread. "No... flame!"

He rushed to stop her but slipped and fell to his hands and knees. The ethran's forearms glowed with heat, fire leaping

from her palms. Several of the bleakborn were engulfed, writhing in the flames. The nearness of warmth was a blessing before it was sucked away.

The flames died, swallowed by flesh that blushed and plumped as the frozen blood within thawed and began to flow. Rashemi faces, restored to a horrific semblance of life, twisted into horrified grimaces as if some dim memory of death had sparked in their minds. They stared at hands that were no longer icy claws. The effect was brief, holding for a heartbeat before the patches of white spread, a pallor of death reclaiming their cursed flesh. They whined as the heat bled from them, raising their arms, hungry for more as they advanced on the living.

The fang moved to defend their ethran. Wide-eyed as he surveyed the closing circle of undead, Bastun summoned his axe blade. Anilya's voice rose in casting and she spun as her sellswords formed their own semi-circle. Battle cries, blades, and cracking ice echoed within the enclosure. Raising his axe, Bastun searched for his place in the circle, turning as he listened to the chaotic rhythms—and detected an inconsistency.

A bleakborn shattered as the durthan completed her spell. Thaena grunted as she took another off its feet, muttering arcane phrases to keep it down. A clang of steel on his right, a dying sellsword gasping for breath on his left. From above he caught whispering and a rustle of robes.

The dark figure on the eastern wall moved before Bastun could get a better look, but its voice continued to whisper words of magic. Bastun charged forward, sidestepping a stumbling berserker, the man's arms coated with thin ice. A bleakborn hissed as it knelt to finish its grisly feeding. Horrified, Bastun slashed at its skull, using the strike to slip past the combatants. The blade split through flesh and bone as he turned with the swing.

Bolts of flame arced from above and he dived forward, the edges of his robes singed and steaming in the snow. The

figure above disappeared again, but its aim had been true. The nearly beheaded bleakborn rose, its flesh healed, and reached toward the vremyonni. He cursed as the undead's freezing aura gripped him. Pushing himself up along the ruined wall, Bastun struggled to summon a spell through the cold.

Ohriman appeared, kicking the bleakborn down and slashing at its grasping fingers. Blood spilled and became a black ichor as it hit the ground. Not waiting to thank the tiefling, Bastun turned to the wall and began to climb, finding easy hand- and footholds in the crumbling stonework.

Wind and snow greeted him atop the wall as he stood and peered through the mist for the figure on the tower. Stalking forward, he glanced once at the battle below, his allies barely visible through the haze. Only Anilya stood out, her arms raised as she chanted a dark language over the bodies of several fallen sellswords. Bastun shuddered and ignored the durthan, focusing on the tower.

The figure appeared, dressed in long robes and a furred cloak with a brace of amulets around his neck and braided into his long, unkempt hair—the look of a Nar shaman. Even across the distance that separated them, Bastun could see a spark of madness glinting in the Creel's eye. Spying Bastun, the shaman snarled, baring his teeth as Bastun approached.

"What do you want with the Shield?" Bastun asked as he adjusted the angle of his axe, edging forward and determined to discover if he faced a simple barbarian or something more sinister. "Why have you come?"

The Creel's answer was a string of arcane syllables, summoning a smoky darkness that enveloped his hand. Bastun charged, muttering a curse. With a quick spell he might have killed the shaman, but he needed answers. He dodged left, skirting the edge of the wall as a ribbon of darkness shot past him. It grazed his arm, searing as it passed through robes and flesh. Growling through the pain,

he darted forward, ducking beneath another bolt of shadow, and shoved the Creel backward.
A dagger flashed in the shaman's hand, but it proved no match for Bastun's axe. Wincing at the pain in his arm, he separated the Creel from the dagger, taking several fingers in the process. Reversing his swing, he cracked the butt of his staff into the screaming man's jaw.
The shaman, his pain-filled screams cut short, toppled back to the tower's edge, but Bastun caught the front of his robes. Dazed, hanging over the long drop, the Creel's head rolled back, smeared with blood and spitting teeth.
"Why have you come here?" Bastun yelled, shaking the man and threatening with his axe. His injured arm burned with the weight, but he managed to hold on as the dangling man coughed and laughed weakly.
"You are... fool... witch-wizard," he replied in a broken Common, blinking and trying to focus on his ruined hand.
"Why? Why am I a fool?" Bastun asked, his arm aching with strain.
"Old blood... is come here." The shaman's eyes cleared, madness shining in them as he glared in fury. "He put... house back in order... his Breath... to end you!"
Bastun felt his heart skip a beat, the Creel's words turning his concerns into grim reality.
"The Breath," he whispered, "Where? Do you—?"
His shoulder popped and he cried out as the Creel slipped away. Bastun stumbled backward, his shoulder limp and arm dangling. In pain, he dimly heard the shaman hit the stones below, a fleeting comfort as he contemplated the man's last words.
"No time," he muttered. "No time now."
Kneeling, he retrieved his axe, pinned his hand under the shaft with his boot, and gripped the dislocated shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he pushed.
The white-hot pain of his shoulder snapping into place brought stars to his eyes. Awkwardly he stood and leaned on

the edge of the tower. A rousing cry erupted among the berserkers as the scouts returned and joined the battle. Sighing in relief, Bastun slumped and crawled back to the ruined end of the wall, edging his way down carefully.

The warriors' blades made little more than writhing parts of the bleakborn. They kicked the pieces away from one another, spitting in disgust while at the same time muttering prayers of peace for their cursed brethren.

As Bastun rested, he noticed a change in the eyes of the fang. They gathered and made signs of warding. A handful of the sellswords stood at the edge of the enclosure, staring blankly into a distant nowhere. Bastun recalled hearing the durthans dark spell and looked upon the mindless dead she had made of her own men.

"Abominations!" Thaena shouted.

"Perhaps," Anilya countered. "But abominations that tipped the odds in our favor." Several of the bleakborn lay smashed at the zombies' feet.

"This is not our way," said Thaena. "To win at any cost, inviting evil such as this to darken our doorstep!"

"And our alliance?" Anilya replied, crossing her arms. "Is one cost more acceptable than another?"

"We will make allowances for the living as need dictates," the ethran said, "but we will not resort to fouling the laws of nature. Shandaular bears curse enough without your help."

The ethran turned back to the fang, pointing at the Shield's doors.

"Get those open," she ordered, then faced Anilya again, gesturing at the undead. "Burn them."

Their masks, night and day, displayed a conflict far beyond the mere use of necromancy. Anilya broke the stare, glancing sidelong at her creations.

"Fine," she said calmly, then added before turning away, "But in the future you might do well to consider the costs of defeat."

Ohriman followed the durthan, lighting a torch and

descending to the courtyard behind the walking dead.
Looking west Bastun searched through the fog, now growing lighter as dawn neared. High above in the northwest tower he spotted a faint pinpoint of flickering light, like an earthbound star dying and choking in Shandaular's misty cloak.
"Old blood," he muttered, recalling the shaman's words. The Creel had indeed come with some knowledge of the Shield's secrets. Briefly Bastun wondered if it had been they who had invaded the Running Rocks, stolen the scrolls, and slain old Keffrass. Even with the scrolls, the Breath's location was a mystery, known only to a select few among the wychlaren and vremyonni, but his sense of urgency was nonetheless jolted by the thought. He started as the doors creaked open behind him.
The smell of smoke drew his gaze to the durthan on the steps below, the dead standing at mute attention as they were set aflame. They did not move, feeling no pain as their cold flesh charred and fell away, slowly revealing skull-grins and emptied sockets before falling one by one to the ground. He caught the durthans eye, her mask aglow in the flames' light.
Troubled by the connection in that stare, he turned toward the opening doors, away from the smell of burning flesh and the flashing eyes of Anilya.
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Burning cinders floated through the air around Anilya, but she paid them no mind. The vremyonni was a far more intriguing subject than the wasteful destruction of perfectly good bodies. He turned away from her and she smiled, wondering how the presence of this exile could be used to her advantage.
Steam hissed from the snow as Ohriman tossed the torch away.
"This ethran is a fool, Anilya," he said. "The zombies would have made excellent shields if the Creel choose to attack

again."
"True enough," she answered, "but they were a mistake. A useful one to be sure, but not one I shall repeat."
"This alliance you've forged for us is teetering on a very precarious edge. We should have gone on without the Rashemi or killed them when we had the chance."
"No, Ohriman." She turned to face him. "The Rashemi may be dangerous, but they are loyal to the wychlaren above all else. They will prove useful in time."
"What of these swords-for-hire?" he asked, glancing toward the men at the top of the stairs. "How can we be sure they'll follow through with this? Mere coin cannot buy that kind of loyalty."
"Their rations and wine are drugged," she said. "A derivative of Theskian thrallwine. It will keep them under control and, fortunately, not very bright."
"And the vremyonni? He knows something, I can taste it in his scent."
Anilya did not answer right away, though she was concerned about Bastun's knowledge as well. Looking back up the stairs she could see the tops of the Shield's doors opening. She could imagine what they might find inside. Dealing with the wychlaren was a nuisance. She despised their xenophobic views of the outside world. Rashemen was a land of power and the wychlaren merely caretakers until someone with more lust for battle came along to take it from them.
A shower of sparks and steam rose as another of the zombies collapsed into the snow to smolder and pop.
"Perhaps you are right," she said at length, looking at the flickering window in the northwest tower. "Keep a close watch on the exile. Do not let him out of your sight."
"You think he knows?"
"He is vremyonni," she said. "Musty old tomes and ancient knowledge are their lives."
"Pity for them," he replied. "No wonder he's leaving."

"People abandon their homes for many reasons, Ohriman," she said quietly, more to herself than the tiefling, as she studied the high walls and towers of the Shield. "Not the least of which is the idea of returning... to make it stronger than it was before."
Ohriman raised an eyebrow, then smiled. "You haven't drugged me, have you?"
Her hand shot out, gripping his neck, but quickly turning to a soft caress as she pressed her body against his.
"If I had, you wouldn't have asked."
She placed a finger across his lips as the smoke and ash of the dead swirled around them.
And Narfell rose, by demon's crown, to ruin Ashanath,
An empire born, Thargaun's glory, in ash of Shandaular,
But the Nentyarch's prince, cold and cruel, the
youngest of his heirs, Remained within the broken Shield, his battle not
yet done.
The walls were drowned in blood and ice; the towers
filled with bones. Soldiers slain, forgotten names, to die for their king
in vain,
As Narfell s prince marched through the halls to
search among the dead. Within the walls, inside the halls; to steal the
Breath, to seal the Death Of the Shield and speak the Word.
Of the Shield and speak the Word.
—excerpt from the Firedawn Cycle, canto XI
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chapter eight
J3astun entered the hall of the Shield cautiously, taking in the high columns and their arching tops, the intricate stonework that had escaped the magical cold outside, and finally the grim scene of death that lay upon the floor. Few spoke as the Rashemi filed inside behind their ethran. Those that did whispered quiet prayers of peace for the dead.

Thaena stood as still as the columns that lined the old hall, unmoving and resolute.

Bodies lay strewn across the floor. Most still gripped the great axes favored by warriors of the Bear Lodge. Bastun viewed each with a grief that bordered on anger. He kept to the edges of the chamber, kneeling here and there to peer at scuff marks in the dust and the scratches on stone. He took note of all entrances to the hall. Aside from the main entrance and two side passages, there seemed to be no other way in—nothing obvious, at least. None of these could accommodate the force that must have been fought here, not in such a manner as to slay so many and leave none behind to lie alongside the Rashemi.

More torches were lit as warriors filed past the dead, each performing their own rites of farewell to brethren lost in battle. Thaena approached the center of the bodies and knelt before a prone form that stood out starkly among the others.

The dead hathran's ornate robes were singed and torn, her mask split down its length by a charred crack, the face beneath still hidden in death. Beside her, in pieces, lay her whip—a weapon that marked the hathran as much as the axe marked her fang. Thaena gathered these as she prayed and swore to make right what had gone so horribly wrong. Bastun quietly echoed that oath, though he wondered how he might go about doing what had to be done.

Anxious, his eyes crawled across the walls, imagining the chambers and corridors and ruin that separated him from one of the key components in Shandaular's destruction. The Breath was buried, of that he was sure. Finding its grave would be a matter of memory and luck. He shuddered at the thought of it in Creel hands.

Wind and pale morning light heralded the entrance of Anilya and her warriors. Ohriman scowled at the scene that greeted them, but Anilya's eyes found Bastun first, and again he sensed the mind of a kindred spirit. Kneeling, he stole away

from her gaze to study more closely the body of a nearby warrior. He listened as she ordered her men to help secure the hall.

The body was unmarked save for a few shallow gashes along the arms and neck. No blood had flowed from the wounds. In fact he could see no sign of blood anywhere. The cuts were jagged and puckered, their edges a pale white. He resisted the urge to inspect them further. Eyes followed his every movement and he did not wish to attract any more attention than he already had.

He watched Thaena, quiet and solemn, wanting to sit beside her, to tell her of his fears and what needed to be done, but he also feared his own motives for doing so. To confide in her could revive whatever sense of trust had been lost, but it could also push them even farther apart and endanger her and all who'd accompanied them to the Shield. There was also the durthan to consider, and the odd truce the two had forged. In the end, it didn't matter—the oath of secrecy he had given to

Keffrass contained no exceptions, no conditions under which he might impart his knowledge to another unless it were a fellow vremyonni.

Thaena glanced up at him, torchlight reflecting in the dampness of her eyes, and he felt himself break. He stepped forward, his heart racing. The thought of speaking to her filled him with dread. He hesitated, torn between duty and hope.

Deliberating, he looked up as Duras approached from behind the ethran. Releasing a held breath, Bastun felt relieved for the brief reprieve and watched. The tall warrior laid a hand upon Thaena's shoulder. She slowly stood and they embraced one another.

Duras rested his cheek upon her hair as she pressed closer to him.

"Lady Ethran," he said. "Guardian," she replied.

Guardian. The word struck Bastun in the chest and he found

himself speechless, his mind clear save for the image of his old friends in an embrace that spoke of far more than friendship. The bond between one of the wychlaren and her chosen guardian was unbreakable, a relationship of tale and song. The girl—nay, the woman—he had known, had thought about since that cold, rainy day of Ulsera's funeral, was gone. He shook his head, gritting his teeth as he corrected himself—she had never existed, not the way he had imagined her. Despite all, he found himself smiling, amused at himself and the boiling rage that churned within him. The heavy years rested upon his shoulders again, heavier for the realization that came over him.

The Breath waited for him somewhere within the Shield, and he needed to begin his search. The Rashemi could deal with the Nar and watch the durthan. He had to make sure the Shield and its secret were safe and secure, and he had to do it in the manner to which he had become accustomed. Alone.

Duras and Thaena shared a quiet look before parting.

As he managed his emotions toward more useful purposes, Bastun knelt and looked again at the body of the dead warrior, at the sightless eyes. He needed no hathran ritual to exile himself and had no intention of waiting for another to arrive. His countrymen had no want or need of his presence, though he chuckled to think of their talk once he was gone.

Even now Syrolf was planting poison in the ears of some of the others. Warriors looked from the dead to the vremyonni and made the signs, the whispers against the evil and misfortune that had plagued them. Bastun met their eyes, each one in turn, and burned those faces into his memory.

This is what I leave, he thought. This is what is left for me here.

Duras gathered several warriors to him, including the ever-watchful Syrolf. More than a few still cast glances at Bastun. He tensed, wondering if his old friend had finally taken to SyrolPs suspicions, but Duras motioned the warriors toward

the western doorway. The group turned and nodded solemnly to Thaena who returned the gesture as they made their way out of the hall.

Bastun stood and made his way to a column at the far end of the chamber. Arcane symbols lined the tops of each column and the portal-like arches between them. The reminder of the portal kept his gaze sweeping through the hall as faded maps scrolled through his mind. There ought to be another door....

Leaning against the column, Bastun edged slowly toward the wall until he found a spot of shadow. He paused there as he contemplated what he was about to do. Anilya approached Thaena slowly, looking once toward Bastun and joining the ethran beside the body of the hathran. The pair spoke quietly, almost conspiratorially, and he felt a flash of alarm at the sight.

He felt his window of opportunity closing. Duras would not be gone long, and Bastun knew he could not escape notice forever. Struggling with the decision for a moment he cursed and slipped into the shadow, leaving his friends to their choices. He had his own to deal with.

His hand found the edge of a hidden space, cleverly concealed by the column, and he slid through the gap into a dark, narrow passage. Listening, he made sure his absence was not noticed before feeling his way down the corridor. He followed the wall for several paces, sliding his hands along the icy stone. His heart raced, though he couldn't help but taste freedom on the cold air.

Stiff cobwebs encrusted with frost and dust broke and fell as he passed. The hidden passage seemed to extend forever into the dark. Angling downward as he went, he tried to maintain his position on the map in his mind, but without proper measurements he could not be exactly sure of where he was. His hand brushed against the wall and he pulled away, feeling something cold squirm beneath his glove.

Falling back, he summoned a pale light to the top of his

staff. It caught the trailing edge of an unidentifiable shadow disappearing into the black. The sensation of being watched crawled over him.

There were warded places in the Shield, protected against the strange hauntings that frequented the old fortress—this was not one of them. Nor was he likely to find many havens in the deeper corridors he sought.

Forging on more carefully, he held the light high and avoided touching the walls. The passage opened behind another column and he stepped into a larger hallway. Looking left and right he saw nothing but more ice and dust. Thin light leaked in through tall windows lining the corridor. A winter morning dawned over the Shield. Ice, snow, and stone walls were all that he could see—a world of silence, a ghost of time.

The back of Bastun's neck prickled and he spun. The hall was as empty as before, though the silence was broken by the faint sound of breathing. A cold breeze blew through the window, whistling slightly and stirring the hem of his cloak. Unnerved, he walked south along the corridor, seeking the path to the library he knew should be somewhere close by.

The breathing grew louder. He held his staff tightly, walking faster even as unintelligible words began to form on the breeze. Dark shadows swirled along the walls, avoiding the edges of his light. They were small and swift, haunting his every step with whispering laughter and wheezing sobs.

Something brushed against his leg. He spun, pointing his staff and breathing heavily. Nothing but the empty hallway.

"Bastun...." a voice said in his ear, a cold breath blowing on his neck.

He cursed and swung his staff. It passed harmlessly through the air. Spells formed in his mind as he turned and waited. His heart and mind raced.

A glint of light just around the bend in the hallway caught his eye, and a childlike face peered at him, its eyes bright and piercing before disappearing around the corner.

Cautiously, he followed. The whispering voices continued, growing louder and harsher. Somehow, he felt he had done this before, like a past dream unfolding in waking life.

A narrow passage appeared, and he just caught sight of the misty edge of what seemed to be a tattered dress disappearing into the darkness. Weeping, screaming, and whispering, the voices pressed in upon him. They touched upon his thoughts, his emotions, and he felt theirs, a forced empathy that blurred his vision as unchecked rage blossomed within him. He ran.

Spells became tattered remnants of arcane passages that he tried to grasp, but they slipped through his thoughts like grains of sand. The direction of the path felt right, though he did not recall it on any of the old maps. The voices sought entrance to his mind, and he cried out as he approached the edge of the corridor. Cursing the limitations of his memory, he stepped into the passage.

The voices stopped, leaving him light-headed. His hands still shaking, he breathed a sigh of relief.

A small flight of steps descended into the shadow, and he made his way down slowly, searching for any sign of the spirits at the edge of his light. At the bottom, the last step gave way beneath his boot and he stumbled. The sound of stone grating against stone followed him as he fell. His staff clattered away from him as he struck the floor, causing the shadows on the wall to dance as its light spun and bounced.

Pushing himself up, he reached for the staff and stopped. At the light's edge stood the translucent form of a little girl, perhaps no older than seven or eight. Her dress was stained and torn, her dark hair blowing in some unfelt wind as she watched him with eyes as bright as new-minted silver coins.

The grinding sound of stone stopped, and he glanced over his shoulder to see a new wall blocking the path behind him.

Flickering shadows brought his eyes back to the staff. The little girl was gone and the light from the staff was swiftly fading, leaving him alone and lost in the dark.

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Thaena stood straight and firm. She issued orders to her men, fortifying the entrance hall as best they could. She kept her eyes focused and full of the steel expected of a wychlaren, but she could not tear her gaze away from the body.

Though she'd refused to remove the ruined mask, the hathran's hands—dotted with the first few spots of age and rough with years of grinding spell components—suggested she was roughly ten years older than the ethran. Glimpses of pale skin between cracks in the mask made Thaena's knees weak and her stomach turn. Absently, her hands reached for the mask over her own face, assuring herself that they could not see, should not see, how frightened she was.

The mask was the guardian of emotion, demanding respect and submission to the wychlaren rule, but like the hathran before her, it was a target for their enemies. Thaena cultivated the anger that rested in her gut, saved it and nourished it with the scene around her. Fury was the only thing that would keep her standing, keep her moving and leading until the Creel were ousted from the Shield.

Her gaze betrayed her determination though, constantly returning to the body of her sister.

She knelt solemnly, drawn to the hathran—as if by seeing every detail, perhaps she could keep it from happening again; as if she could keep death at bay by spying its true nature in the wounds of the dead. Folding her hands across her lap, she bowed her head as if intoning a ritual. It was a show for the berserkers, using what they called the vyrrdi, the mystery of the wychlaren, to allay their fears.

One of the hathran's hands rested close her knee, a red scratch running across the wrist, a fingernail broken. The scratch traveled up the arm, growing deeper as it neared the elbow— i

"I once watched over the body of a hathran."

Thaena flinched, startled by Anilya's voice. "I—I have no

intention of discussing your—"
"Not one that I had slain," Anilya interjected and knelt just behind her. "But one that had taken me under her wing, in Rashemen."
"In Rashemen?" Thaena asked. "You were an ethran?"
"Yes. Many years ago—more than I care to admit."
"How did—how did she die?" Thaena asked.
"We were investigating reports of a Thayan spy near Mulsantir," Anilya said. "We discovered him, along with others, gathering information about our defenses for the zulkirs. They were prepared for us and fought like madmen. My hathran was cut down by the arrows of Thayan assassins."
"I am sorry," Thaena said and meant it.
Anilya edged closer to Thaena's side, looking sidelong at her through her dark mask and its darker covering of sigils. "You could say I've moved on since then."
Thaena looked back to the body. The scent of smoke lingered in Anilya's presence, bringing to mind the bodies raised by her magic. She could trust the durthans hatred of the Creel, but Thaena knew she was far from trusting the durthan herself.
"I was to be made hathran soon after that. The othlor would have sent me to the Urlingwood for the ceremony, but I refused. I wished to extract answers from the Thayan spy, make him tell us what he knew, how much he had told to his masters, and use him to strike back against Thay. And they refused me."
"So you left?" Thaena asked, though she expected Anilya's answer.
"Not right away," the durthan replied, "but I certainly never made it to the Urlingwood. Not while I thought there was more that could have been done—could still be done—for Rashemen."
"Then why the durthan?"
"Because they know the power that our land holds must be

protected."
"The wychlaren are quite capable of—"
"Defending? Maybe, for a time perhaps." Anilya leaned forward, catching Thaena's eye. "But for how long?"
"We have done well enough so far," Thaena answered, though in the back of her mind her reasoning felt flimsy. She broke the stare, pretending to watch the western doors for the return of Duras.
"Defense is well and good, but our enemies still exist, still want what is not theirs." The durthans voice was softer but carried a passion that Thaena could not deny. "As long as we tolerate the existence of our enemies we will see no end to useless deaths such as these."
Anilya pulled from her belt a small smooth stone and laid it upon the lap of the hathran, whispering quiet words before rising to her feet.
"Imagine this chamber as the whole of Rashemen, Thaena. Should we defend this meager hall alone and leave all else to barbarians and outsiders? Or do we venture forth and make war before war comes to claim us?" She turned to leave and added, "And what boundaries can one place on war?"
The scent of smoke remained in the air for several breaths after Anilya had gone.
Thaena pondered the durthans words. Looking again at the hathran, broken and lifeless, all spark of the power she'd possessed gone, Thaena found anger much easier to accept. Of course they would track down the monsters that did this, lay down their bodies alongside the dead they had taken, but she wondered how long before the next attack, the next incursion on wychlaren territory.
She imagined her own body lying on a cold stone floor, being watched over by an ethran, and wondered what she would say to that young girl if she had power to say anything. Leaning closer to the hathran, she studied the stone Anilya had left with the body. Smooth and oval,

colored with flashes of silver and streaks of green, it was beautiful and hauntingly familiar. Her eyes widened as she realized where she had seen such a stone—lying on a shelf beside her mother's bed. It had been a gift from a passing hathran.

Where she had been raised such stones, taken from the depths of the River Ashan, were considered precious. The bearer was said to be guarded by Rashemen and those to whom the stone was given were afforded peace among the land's wilds and waters. She glanced toward the durthan, moved by the unexpected gift from an enemy—a former ethran—and saw her in a very different light.

Reaching out to touch the stone's smooth surface and relive the faint memory of listening to her mother sing while

cooking, she was startled to hear labored breathing next to her ear. She drew her hand back, flinching, and looked around. No one was there. The hathran lay as still and silent as before. A chill crawled up her spine as a whispering floated through the chamber.

The shadows near the ceiling seemed deeper and blacker as she scanned the chamber. The whispering quieted and the breathing faded away, but she could not shake the feeling of being watched. She stood and took one last lingering gaze upon her fallen sister, allowing the image to feed her resolve in solving this mystery.

The Creel were not known for stealth or subtlety, but something very sudden had to have occurred to overcome so many at once. Wards guarded those areas of the Shield in use by the Rashemi, guarded them against the broken spirits that might have committed such a massacre. If those wards had been compromised...

Thaena recalled the durthans mention of the mysterious Nar leader, a wielder of magic that had slipped through their attempts at scrying.

She looked to the walls and ceiling, seeking the source of whatever the Creel had unleashed inside the Shield. Closing

her eyes, she sought the Weave around her, its presence ragged around the edges. It was very different here than in Rashemen—more cultivated, but also more chaotic, much like a Rashemi might compare the Shield to a forest. Shaking her head, she opened her eyes slowly, stone walls feeling narrower and confining, as if they would close in at any moment.

Footsteps echoed dully from the western doors. Duras, followed by Syrolf, entered the room, his face pale and troubled. Waves of relief flooded through her, and she strode toward him as quickly as modesty would allow. He smiled weakly, appearing out of breath as she neared and embraced him. Duras was her anchor, unchanging and steadfast. She clung to his familiarity and strength.

Though he was warm and assuring in his easy silence, she felt sudden flashes of fear for him as the faint sound of whispering returned and unseen eyes stared cold daggers into her. Her mask was no guardian against that invisible watcher, and she held on to Duras a little longer this time—a little longer than modesty would normally allow.

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chapter Nine

Ihe darkness stretched forever, twisting and turning and destroying every hope that Bastun had of finding light. His staff felt heavy and cold, its magic subdued by the maze. The corridors grew and changed the farther he went, the walls scraping his shoulders at times and echoing his footsteps across what seemed great chasms at others. Though he felt very alone, lost in the Shield, he was crowded by the strange haunting that had found him and that refused to let him go.

The voices of children whispered behind him. Tiny hands brushed his arms and facet passing through his robes and mask. Their touch was freezing and penetrating, bringing forth anger, fear, and memories that only confused him further. Scant information existed on the specific nature of

the Shield's spirits, and Keffrass had not dwelled on the subject. Bastun could not deny his sense of curiosity, but his sense of self-preservation came first.

He mumbled, trying to maintain his concentration. A vremyonni sanctuary, a library, lay somewhere nearby—at least he thought so. The distance he had traveled so far would account for much more space than the maps had showed.

Stopping, he pressed himself against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to remember every turn. The rough map in his mind spun and readjusted as he attempted to regain his bearings in comparison to the location of the library. It was

near. He knew he was close. He felt his robes being tugged at from behind and he pulled back, suddenly annoyed as if at a pestering child.

"Stop!" he shouted, feeling immediately foolish at having done so.

They did stop. The whispers hushed, the breathing faded away, and even the air felt less chilled.

Opening his eyes, he stared blindly into the dark. His mind cleared of intrusion and he quickly worked out an idea of his direction. There was no way to be certain, but it was all he had. Almost as an afterthought he tried his staff and managed a dim glow from the steel tip. Breathing a sigh of relief he studied the walls and turned toward what he hoped was west.

The walls were rough cut and black as coal, swallowing the edges of what little light he could manage. Taking tentative steps forward he watched and listened for the return of the spirits. After turning two corners without incident he strode more confidently, eager to escape the maze of corridors. If there were any clues to the Breath's whereabouts, the vremyonni would have them hidden in the library.

The artifact had been forged as a key in the defenses against the encroaching empire of Narfell, but had been

deemed far too dangerous to use even in the saving of Shandaular. It was hidden away, buried and forgotten in secrets and stone. The Ilythiiri magic used in its construction had made it indestructible, so King Arkaius had sealed it away where it would be forgotten. Unfortunately for Shandaular, that secret hadn't been kept well enough. Bastun could only hope that the Breath, like the Shield itself, had all but been forgotten by the world.

"Murderer!"

The voice spoke in his ear and he stopped in his tracks. His hands shook as he turned, finding nothing, just as before. The silence afterward was stifling, and he felt as though he were twelve years old again, catching a loud whisper from across a room of fellow apprentices. His stomach churned at the

memory and his hands balled into fists on reflex.

Gooseflesh rose on his arms and neck. The light of his staff flickered like a weak candle. Nearby stone scraped against stone, growling as the maze came to life again. Shaking off the grasping tendrils of his past, he turned to run—

But found a dead end where before had been open hallway.

Something touched his arm and his mind was again flooded by memories of guilt and anger and pointing fingers. "Traitor!" the voice said.

He ran back the way he had come, but found another dead end and another. The voice whispered the words over and over again, each time stabbing into his mind. He could feel the power in the voice and tried to resist it, but it kept speaking and so he kept running. Anger filled him, welled up in his throat and pressed on his chest until he could no longer ignore the spirits' accusations, hearing himself echoed in the hissing voices, in the empty spaces and shadows that surrounded him.

No! Those are their words, he told himself. Not mine.

The whispers responded, growing louder as they took shape, a child's voice forming within the noise. "But you believe

them," it said.
It was Bastun who had sent Ulsera to her death, he who had lost himself the night his master was murdered. For both lives he had taken some quiet measure of responsibility. Yet in his heart, where he had always searched for and expected to find grief, he had only found rage,
"Where is your breath?" it asked.
In a screech of metal, the axe blade sprung from his staff, shining in the dark. His mind calmed somewhat, but his arms trembled and his jaw clenched.
"Nothing," he muttered, standing straighter. "I owe you nothing. Now leave this place!"
He swung and struck the wall, sending sparks showering to the floor. The voices shrieked in pain as a shadow coalesced on
that wall, forming a twisted face. Long arms ending in wicked claws reached for him. The blackness howled in a decidedly unchildlike manner. Stepping back beyond its reach, he ran, now keeping track of each turn even as more of the shadows appeared along the walls.
He ducked and swung at them with the axe, but he did not stop.
West, he thought as he rounded another corner and stopped short, the path blocked by a young girl at the end of the hallway. The shadows retreated and the whisperers stopped.
Older than the girl he had followed into the maze, this spirit's eyes seemed full of a pain and wisdom far beyond her years. Her dress was little more than sackcloth, and deep wounds encircled each of her pale-skinned wrists. Motes of dust swirled through her translucent form. She stared at him blankly. Just paces away, between him and the ghost, a side passage led south—or what he assumed was south.
Smelling dust and old parchment on the air, he took a tentative step toward the passage. The spirit inclined her head, her dark hair rippling and settling slowly to her shoulders as if underwater. Leaning forward, she lifted her

right foot and the floor trembled as her weight shifted. Unnerved and unwilling to wait for her foot to fall, he ran and dived at the passage.
The spirit child's step landed like the stomp of an angry dragon. The stone walls shook, and dust fell as bits of the ceiling crumbled. The floor heaved, and Bastun stumbled into the hallway, the momentum carrying him tumbling and rolling into an open space.
Falling down a short flight of stairs, he dropped his staff. Something wooden shattered beneath his weight, breaking the fall. His legs crashed against something solid and the sound of falling and ripping parchment surrounded him. Books and scrolls rested beneath his hand, and he breathed a sigh of relief as the quaking stone settled and the dust began to clear.
Dim light illuminated the rafters of a high ceiling and a row of shelves to his right. The blue glow of a cloudy morning filtered in from a nearby window. He rested his head on a thick tome, blinking and coughing. Though no shadows followed him and no whispers pushed their way into his ears, he could still feel them—could still see Ulsera's grave and Keffrass's burned mask.
Disentangling his leg from a fallen stack of books, he pushed himself up on his elbows. The splinters of a rotted footstool crumbled beneath his left hand and he thanked the gods. His back ached well enough from the fall without the assistance of newer furniture to crash into.
"There is no shelter here."
He froze, spying the silhouette of a figure in the dimness. The voices had spoken in unison—all very young, some male and some female, shouting, weeping, and groaning. He rose to a crouch, glancing at the floor in a futile attempt to find his staff.
"What do you want?" he asked, hoping to stall for time. "Why are you here?"
"The cold prince will find you," they answered, "will find us

all. He will freeze your blood and give Breath to the Word. He's coming now... again... always...."
Watching for any movement from the speaker—or rather speakers—he raised the staff. Light burst from its steel sphere, revealing the source of the voices—
The statue of an aged man in long robes.
Bastun looked around, searching for any movement, any sign of the spirits.
Several moments passed, but the voices did not return. Sweat beaded on his brow. His breath came quickly as he turned his attention to a nearby shelf. Hundreds of ancient books lay before him, most looking ready to fall apart at the slightest breeze. Ignoring the thumping in his ears and the anxious dread that prowled in the back of his mind, Bastun began to scan the spines.
The ones he sought would be more enduring, as the protected texts of wizards usually were.
Fear led him from shelf to shelf, book to book, searching for anything that might lead him to the Breath. There was no way to know how long the haunting might leave him in peace. Over and over the spirits' last words marched in his mind.
Though the Breath drove his search, their mention of the Word intensified it.
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"He's gone."
Syrolf strode across the room, sidestepping Duras and Thaena as he drew his sword. Following his gaze, the ethran's eyes narrowed as she realized her mistake. Bastun had disappeared.
"Search the walls!" she commanded, suspecting the vre-myonni's knowledge of the Shield had allowed him to slip away through some secret passage. The fang responded instantly, though Duras stayed at her side, the expression on his face unreadable.
"Are you surprised he left?" he asked.

"Not entirely."
"He did nothing wrong, Thaena. If Syrolf had his way—"
"He'd have killed him," Thaena replied coldly and found herself somewhat unmoved by the fact. The look of shock on Duras's face caused her to look away, unable to deal with his loyalty to an old friend in light of the death that surrounded them. "Bastun was selfish. He might have stayed and helped us against the Creel. He could have helped us protect Rashemen and take at least that much dignity with him into exile."
Stepping away from Duras, she watched the fang tear down tapestries and drag them over the bodies to better inspect the columns and walls. The tapestries, maintained by simple cantrips, depicted scenes of Shandaular's founding and daily life. Bright colors and the woven history of a hopeful past hid faces of the dead in a grim present. Somehow the image haunted her, and a pang of fear stabbed through her heart, almost like the memory of a dream.
"So you think Syrolf is right, that Bastun is a murderer and a traitor?" Duras said from behind her.
Turning, she saw the confusion in his eyes. Despite his strength and ferocity in battle, there was an innocence in the big warrior that had drawn her to him. An innocence that was infuriating at times.
"What has he done to prove Syrolf wrong?" she asked.
"Bastun has nothing to prove. We both know that."
"Do we? What do we really know about Bastun? He's been gone from both of our lives for so long, you can't possibly know that he can be trusted now. Why do you defend him?"
"Because no one else will," he answered, and she could see the fire in his eyes. "The othlor would have executed him if he were guilty of the charges, but she did not! And we both know what happened to Ulsera."
Thaena held up her hand, silencing him as she looked around. No one seemed to be listening. Bastun's sister had been slain in the Urlingwood, a sacred ground of the

wychlaren, forbidden to anyone not of the secretive sisterhood—under pain of death. She gave him a meaningful look, pleading with her eyes for him to understand.
"I am sorry, Duras," she said, softening her voice. "I cannot be of two minds on this. I cannot allow the past or old friendships to affect my judgment. Not this time."
The fire left his eyes. Duras would uphold the law, she knew. His dedication to Rashemen ran deeper than any warrior she had ever known, but he walked a narrow path and she had joined him there. Though they hadn't seen or heard from Bastun in years, he had been a constant presence between them, an unspoken name in their tightest embraces and, at times, an awkward silence. Duras would protect his friend, just as she had protected Duras from himself.
"Lives are at stake," she said, "and an exile suspected of treason has gone missing, likely of his own accord. I must lead in this."
Duras nodded and crossed his arms, but he would not meet her eyes.
"Just remember, Thaena"—he gestured toward the fang—"where you lead, they will follow."
She heard the innocence in his voice fade. She was their ethran. What Syrolf believed, if she believed it, would become law. What the others might suspect, if she spoke aloud, they would act upon. Words—her words—could cost an innocent man his life.
Only one question remains, she thought as Syrolf approached. Is Bastun truly innocent?
"The exile has escaped," Syrolf reported smugly. "There is a passage behind one of the columns that extends for some distance into darkness. Do you wish us to pursue him?"
Thaena stared at the walls and the ceiling, imagining the size of the Shield and the myriad of places Bastun could be. She cursed him for making things far more complicated than they already were. She swore at herself as well, for believing she might be able to trust the vremyonni despite evidence

to the contrary. He had betrayed what trust she had given him, and no matter his motives, she had to assume the worst —that Syrolf might be right.

"No," she said. "Though we will consider the vremyonni a threat until proven otherwise. For now the Nar must take precedence. What is the status of the western corridors?"

"No sign of the invaders," Duras answered, looking at the floor, his tone edging on anger. "The central tower seems mostly ruined, but there are stairs ascending into the north wall."

"My scouts reported lights flickering in the northwest tower." Anilya strode forward casually. "I suspect our uninvited guests will be found there."

Thaena nodded, considering the distance involved through unwarded sections of the Shield. The hathrans used only the central-most walls and towers from which to scry and watch upon the western lands. The rest of the citadel had been observed and debated over, but no direct solutions had yet been decided upon. Though she was concerned about the Shield's curse, as one of the wychlaren she was bound to deal with the Nar and the spirits they would disturb.

"We will make our way there," she said. "Guard towers along the wall may serve as safe points should we run into trouble."

Anilya left to prepare her men.

"I doubt the Creel will give us much trouble," said Syrolf.

"No," Thaena said. "I fear the Creel may be the least of our worries."

Syrolf nodded, spat in the durthans direction, and went to assist the others with the bodies. The fang would follow her, but they knew the rumors of the Shield and would feel the borders of hathran wards as they crossed them. Syrolf, second only to Duras, spoke for them all, their readiness to do what must be done for Rashemen. Thaena was not particularly fond of the runescarred warrior, but she saw in his arguments a troubling logic that she was loathe to

accept.
She rested her hand on Duras's shoulder, and they shared a look of brief understanding—a truce until they might be alone. She walked into the western corridor. Wild winds whistled through tall windows on the north wall, carrying snow and a chill that felt comforting after the stifling warmth of the entrance hall. The sky outside remained a solid gray wall of thick clouds, a storm front heralding the first of many more freezing days to come.
Leaning into the window she breathed in and enjoyed the freezing air as only a Rashemi could. Laying her hands on the stone, she lowered her head and prayed to the Three for forgiveness of her decisions and victory in battle against the Shield's invaders. Ice and snow on the stone numbed her hands and sent an odd sensation through her forearms. Her first instinct was to pull away, but as her heart began to hammer in her chest she thought of all she had seen in the last few hours, and she pressed her hands harder against the cold.
She spent so much time suppressing what she felt, in order to appear cold and emotionless, wise and infallible, doing it for the sake of the fang. Her mind filled with images of battle, of wielding a sword and losing herself to the bloodlust of a berserker. All this time she had spent trying to react and lead as a wychlaren suddenly seemed such a waste. The Ice Wolves were berserkers, hunters that respected strength. She should have ordered Syrolf to slit Bastun's throat, should have executed Anilya without question. Her breathing turned ragged and throaty as she recalled missed opportunities for all the blood she should have spilled—could be spilling now if she hadn't been so weak at the sight of one of her own dead on the floor.
Bile welled in her throat in disgust as Duras's words echoed in her mind. Her lover's hypocrisy seemed boundless, defending the vremyonni, the exile that could be meeting even now with the Creel and plotting their deaths. Duras

had wanted to die before, years ago when he had confided in her. He had asked her to do it, to end his guilt, and she had stupidly refused, already in love with him. She imagined cold steel in her hands, a white-knuckled grip as she plunged the blade through Duras's gut for his sins.

Thaena choked at the thought, blinking and shaking her head. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She tried to pull away from the window, but something held her fast. Looking down she found thin, shadowy fingers laced through her own—long black claws of inky blackness encircling her wrists.

She stumbled back, ripping her arms away from the window and staring wide-eyed as the ghostly hands melted into shreds

of smoky mist and curled away. Rubbing feeling back into het hands she approached the window cautiously, looking farther down the hallway for any other disturbances.

Wind howled past the window as before, snow fell thick and silent, but nothing seemed amiss. She gripped her stomach, the image of Duras spitted on a blade embedded in her mind. A knot formed in her throat, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

Collecting herself and catching her breath, she looked upon the stone around her as if it were alive, watching her weakness and studying her vulnerabilities. Hearing voices near the door, she took a breath and stood up straight, meeting the eyes of Duras as he led the others. The mask saved her, hid the ordeal that might've shown on her face, but Duras knew her better than the others. His brow furrowed in question and she shook her head.

Syrolf followed just behind, the fang armed and ready to meet their enemies after dealing with the dead. Bloodlust filled their eyes, and in her heart she mirrored that thirst for battle, but could not shake the fear that something in the stone walls—something long dead—was spying on them.

The two groups gathered, barely forty strong. Anilya walked confidently toward Duras and Thaena, seemingly unaware of

the troubling stares between them.
"We are prepared?" Anilya asked.
Before Thaena could answer, Syrolf appeared at the durthans shoulder. "Where is your dog, durthan?" "What? "Anilya turned to Syrolf.
"Ohriman," Duras said and stepped between Thaena and the durthan. "Where is he?"
Thaena eyed the Rashemi and the sellswords, once again noticing the dangerous tension that had sparked between them. She raised her head and spotted tiny motes of shadow growing like bits of mold on the ceiling. They squirmed over everyone's heads as if tasting hate on the air and feeding from it.
"I sent my guide'—Anilya glared at Syrolf—"to examine the eastern corridors and to discover what became of your lost vremyonni. I trust you might see the wisdom in that, yes?"
Syrolf grunted and stepped back, casting a meaningful glance at Duras before rejoining the rest of the fang. Tensions calmed somewhat. The tiny shadows shrank and crawled back into their stones. Thaena shuddered, the memory of their touch still burning in her hands.
The ethran nodded at Duras, turned, and began their journey to the northwest tower. The others fell in step, scouts taking the lead ahead of her and Duras. Her head ached as she thought of the variables that surrounded her—threats on every side, strife that might erupt at the slightest misunderstanding, Bastun missing, and the Creel entrenched in her sisters' outpost.
One of the men lit a torch as they turned away from the windows and deeper into the Shield's mysteries. Shadows danced and flickered on the walls, and Thaena swore she could hear them whispering.
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chapter Ten
'Jhe sound of pages rustling as he turned them, the smell of dust and dried leather bindings—all brought Bastun back to

his time among the vremyonni. Though the books had calmed him, he was growing frustrated, and time did not seem to be on his side. Not finding what he sought, he shelved another tome and searched for another that might have withstood the test of years. Faint auras of magic drew him toward several tomes. The minor spells kept the pages from growing brittle and disintegrating.

Pulling another book down he carefully flipped through its pages and recalled the late nights, reading alone in the caverns of the Running Rocks. Master Keffrass had encouraged him to socialize with the other apprentices, but Bastun only found the company distracting. He far more enjoyed having the great library to himself. During those years after Ulsera's funeral, after being taken away and hidden with the other wizards, he found little use—or success—in forging relationships with others. Fortunately, Keffrass kept him in some practice in regards to conversation and social skills.

Frustrated, Bastun shelved the book and stood back, taking in the image of the Shield's library. Torn and yellowed pages littered the floor, dust and cobwebs hung between the shelves, and tiny cracks webbed through the stone beneath his boots. He felt transported into his own mind, a past corrupted by decisions gone
awry, left alone to sort out what went wrong. Sighing, he continued the search, finding yet another shelf that caught his eye.

Leaning at the end, small and bound by leather straps, were two worn journals. Lifting one gently and blowing away the dust on its cover, he found the imprint of a coat of arms. Much of the image was worn away, but he could make out runic writing on the edge of an ornate shield and within that the unmistakable shape of Shandaular's portal-arch—the standard of the Shield. Carefully he unwound the cracked and dried strap and opened the book to the first page.

The writing was faded and in a language he could not

readily identify. The other book bore the same coat of arms and a similar writing style. They both had regular entries in a script that bespoke of an acute skill for conveying specific symbols and shapes. He narrowed his eyes and looked around, scanning the shelves once more before gambling on the pair. Deciding quickly, he brought them to a stone bench and laid them flat.

Setting aside his staff, he summoned the words to one of the first spells he had learned. Speaking clearly, he intoned the magic while resting his fingertips on the first journal's cover. There was no flash of light, no glow or any of the effects that other apprentices had clamored for when time came to gain more magic for their fledgling spellbooks. Bastun had seen the spell for what it truly was: a key to the knowledge in all the other books of the vremyonni library.

Opening to the first page again, the writing changed as he viewed it, the language becoming his own, and he read that page with no small amount of relief:

The Personal Writings
and Musings of Athumrani Zukar Magewarden of Dun-Tharyn
and Counsel to King Arkaius of Shandaular

Picking up the journal, he sat upon the bench and began to read, turning pages gently but quickly, searching for any mention of the Breath or where it might be hidden. He knew clues were the best he might find. If the Breath had been used, what they had actually unleashed would have been clear to all. What had been intended as a weapon of defense, the stories said, was made a horrible force of destruction by the inclusion of the Ilythiiri magic they had gleaned from the portal.

Details of daily life abounded. He found notes concerning research, news from other lands, minor shortages of resources, and trade routes becoming more dangerous. Exotic creatures and spices were brought from Shandaular's sister city in the far south, the portal causing a remarkable mixture of cultures that drew merchants and scholars in

droves. Soon though, trade from neighboring villages stopped altogether. Caravans were attacked and burned, left as warning for any who might defy the rule of the Nentyarch of Dun-Tharos. The world around Shandaular grew smaller and smaller as Narfell crept toward its doorstep and demanded submission.

Though Bastun yearned to sit and read until as much dust covered him as the shelves surrounding, he pressed on, scanning quickly.

Athumrani's writing was precise and to the point, making Bastun's reading all the easier. As he neared the end, he feared he had indeed wasted the valuable spell. The last few pages, however, gave him a glimpse of what he had been waiting to see. Athumrani's script became more erratic and hurried, the words more urgent.

After months of waiting we have seen the results of Arkaius's work, and while it is a marvel of ambition and talent, his creation is monstrous. His control was tenuous at best. Even he was surprised at what he unleashed. My hands shake as I write this, and the walls still seem to hum

with its power. The Word was all that we had expected and more. Far more than we could—or should—ever use. The secrets of the Ilythiiri must remain forever as they are: secrets.

The Arkaius of Bastun's studies matched the sensibilities of the man described by Athumrani. He was by all accounts a good king with good intentions, but in the last days of Shandaular he had grown desperate as NarfelPs attacks became more determined.

The Nar grow bolder each time they assault us. Nentyarch Thargaun has sent all of his savage sons with armies to break our defenses, but to no avail as of yet. I have evidence of spies among us. Even now, I cannot trust my own advisors. They have taken so much from us. From me. The Nentyarch has one last son to send, and the roads have been silent for nearly a tenday. I have studied the Breath

and the Word to the extent of my abilities. Frost forms on the walls no matter how many torches we light or spells we cast to warm the citadel. Terrible cold haunts me every day. With time I feel I could unmake these terrible weapons, but the Ilythiiri magic is persistent, almost alive in the way it clings to even fragments of the runic patterns. I find it hard to concentrate on the greater good and the lives of the many, when it is all I can do to not think of her. I have no more time. The Breath must be hidden and the portal destroyed, though I fear it may not be enough. My despair is unending of late, and I question Arkaius's decision to trust me with this thing he has wrought. I shall miss our Shield, as I will our king. And my daughter..."

Several sketches followed this last entry, and Bastun tried to make sense of them, but could only identify pieces of what appeared to be an intricate map. He feared the true map was only in Athumrani's mind, and this drawing, though possibly accurate, was only a two-dimensional representation of what could be stairs up or down here, a tower or perhaps empty space there. The most he could decide upon was direction. The rest could be a network of arcane traps and dead ends.

"If nothing else, it is a start," he muttered.

He closed the journal and stared at the shelves, the walls, and the ceiling, trying to piece together what he knew of the Shield's layout with the Magewarden's drawings. Rubbing his eyes he picked up the second journal.

A cold breeze whistled through the room from the north, and he noted a sliver of light shining above one of the shelves. Curious and hesitant, drawn to the second journal, he reluctantly placed both books within his robes and stood to inspect the source of the disturbance.

A ladder stood against the shelves, leading up to a low railing. Carefully testing the rungs, he found them solid—a newer addition if not very recent. Climbing up, he peered over the top to find a small loft. Light came in through a

crack in a thick curtain across the north window.
Climbing into the loft, he saw a desk, a comfortable looking if dusty chair, and against the north wall, a bed. Unfortunately, it did not appear to be empty. Keeping his staff at the ready he approached the bed, its mattress old and sagging beneath the weight of whoever lay within. Simple sheets and thick fur covers obscured the figure, which gave no indication of sensing Bastun's presence.
Raising his staff and grasping the edge of the blankets with his other hand, he pulled them away. For half a breath he wished he hadn't.
The figure, lying in repose, had been dead for some years. The skin was taut over an aged face. Yellowed white hair haloed
the frail skull of an old man in plain dark robes. Lowering the staff Bastun stared at the corpse curiously until he noted, beside the pillow, an all-too-familiar mask.
"Vremyonni," he whispered, recalling the men who had come to study the Shield at the hathrans' behest. This one had obviously elected to stay behind, maybe to maintain the library or merely to lose himself in the rich history of a time long lost. Replacing the blankets reverently, Bastun whispered a quiet prayer, a small rite for a fallen brother.
He sat on the edge of the chair and studied the loft, taking note of the thick curtains, much like ones he himself had drawn after a long night of reading. Turning toward the opposite window the whole of the library was visible to him —rows upon rows of shelves, scrolls beyond counting, more books than one might read in a lifetime. Much as he felt the solemnity in a dead brother's presence, he found himself envying such a life. Peace and quiet, reading and learning, hidden away as the wychlaren willed. But free.
Glancing at the old master he considered the prospect of a peaceful death, far from the troubles and trials of people he could not understand. The breeze blew again, disturbing the curtains and allowing the light to glint off of something

small on the vremyonni's hand,
Looking closer, he saw it was a ring of an odd design, nothing like the vremyonni normally crafted. Quietly begging the late master's forgiveness he lifted the hand closer to inspect the golden band. Tilting it toward the light, he made out a sigil like the one upon Athumrani's journal—the shield of Shandaular. Tiny symbols decorated the sides of the ring—a mixture of arcane runes, some recognizable, the others of Ilythiiri origin.
Another item of hybrid magic? he wondered. There was no record of it.
He made to remove the ring, and despite his curiosity he realized he was holding hands with a corpse. Though far from
Rashemen and well aware of the difference between superstition and true danger, he reached into his robes, searching for a pouch he always carried. Scooping out some of its contents, he produced a fistful of soil and sprinkled it liberally over the vremyonni's body.
"The land be with you always, Old One," he said, and gently removed the ring.
Stepping back he studied the ring more closely. There was no indication of what it could do, what it was for, or why it even existed. After all Bastun had been told of the Breath and the Word and of the Ilythiiri magic that infected this place—that the caretaker had chosen to wear such an artifact seemed strange and reckless. Bastun had never questioned the Old Ones and trusted in their wisdom of crafted items, but the ring tugged upon some dim memory he couldn't readily place. Trusting instinct and the judgment of his seniors, he placed it upon his finger with a held breath.
The metal was warm and the loop somewhat loose. But even as he watched it shrunk to fit him, as many magical rings tended to do. He felt heartened that at least that particular aspect seemed normal enough. Little else occurred. Though

somewhat disappointed, he decided to hang on to the artifact, its markings and design too coincidental to ignore.
Waves of nausea assaulted his stomach, and he doubled over, feeling as if he had swallowed liquid fire. His gut burned and his skin tingled with strange power. Falling to his hands and knees, he tried to pry the ring from his finger, clenching his teeth against the pain. Slowly it faded as did the cold that previously occupied the library. Collecting himself, he sat up and studied the ring again, unchanged and as mysterious as before.
Narrowing his eyes in thought, he noticed the light in the chamber growing dimmer. Standing and rushing to the window, he looked out at the sky. The clouds had grown thicker and darker. Eerie, silent lightning flashed, and the wind gained more strength. Shandaular's mists rose and fell like troubled waves, and they clung to the ruins despite the weather. Gooseflesh rose on the nape of his neck, and he turned, finding the bright eyes of the smallest of the spirits spying upon him from the ladder.
Her appearance startled him and touched upon the memory of Ulsera—both the spirit and his sister seemed roughly the same age, both of them long dead. The little girl, barely translucent, her face marked by cruelty, regarded him with a mixture of pity and fear. Tentatively he took a breath and made to address the spirit, but she disappeared in a blur.
Running to the railing he searched the library floor, looking for any sign of the ghost. With the sudden feeling of being watched, he found her bright, unnerving eyes again. She huddled in a narrow doorway on the west wall, pale fingers clinging to the edge. Bastun was intrigued by the spirit, sensing an odd familiarity in her eyes, but he could not discern if this was only the memory of his sister imposed upon the translucent features of the young girl.
As they stared at one another, his eyes were drawn to a strange glow just above the doorway. Etched into the stone was a tiny, simple marker—a vremyonni symbol. He touched

his mask and felt foolish for having worn it so long even while alone. It had been such a part of him he'd forgotten it was there—and fortunately so, for he could not have seen the symbol without it.

Looking back down, he saw that the spirit was gone. Disheartened by the loss of an opportunity to speak with her, he noted the direction of the corridor, the vremyonni marker, and the sketches from Athumrani's journal. Though he felt as tossed by chance as any snowflake in the winter storm outside, he whispered a final farewell to the vremyonni and climbed down the ladder.

Approaching the doorway, the glow from his staff flickered, and he prepared himself to make the acquaintance of the Shield's spirits once again.

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With each step into the west tower, Thaena's dread grew stronger. The walls closed in as the group made their way, and she had to focus on each breath, each step, always careful to hide her discomfort.

They found wychlaren wards at regular intervals, covered over with more of the Nar glyphs, these written not in ash and oil, but blood. The Creel seemed to be systematically destroying the very protections that made Shandaular and the Shield even remotely safe for mortals. She could not imagine the madness that would send such an invitation to the dead.

Duras stayed close, his concern for her obvious in his stance and bearing. He stared at the walls as if teeth-filled mouths might appear on them at any moment. There was no time to explain to him what she had been made to feel, what she had imagined. Nor did she think she could, even if the rest of the fang were not so near and the walls not so conducive to carrying even the slightest sound. Keeping what she had experienced a secret seemed more and more pointless as they climbed. Everyone could sense something wrong. She heard whispers of smordanya—a place that existed as a

pathway or gate between the world of the living and the dead.
It is an accurate description, she thought.
Louder voices echoed from above, and she was ushered through the group, Duras and Anilya close behind. They had reached a large semi-circular landing with tall windows. Wind whipped at their long braids, and snow piled in small drifts on the floor. Half-buried in the snow were two more Rashemi bodies, frozen like those at the gates. No one approached, and the lead warriors looked to Thaena for instructions.
"Signs of movement?" she asked while studying the corpses.
The warriors shook their heads.
"We must wait," Duras said close to her ear. "If they have been defiled, we are honor bound to destroy them, give them peace. If not..."
"Then it is a desecration," Thaena finished.
"Perhaps," Anilya said, "but why take any chances either way:
"Perhaps you did not hear my mention of honor," Duras said angrily.
"Or perhaps I did. Honor may leave them in peace, but peace by its very nature is temporary," Anilya said. "We've already left plenty of bodies in our wake that could be used against us."
Thaena strode forward, ending the argument before it could continue. Approaching the bodies she held out her hands, feeling for the cold aura of the bleakborn reaching out for her warmth. The durthans words echoed in her mind as she neared the dead warriors. She wondered why those in the entrance hall had not been raised in such a manner. A chill in her fingertips interrupted the thought. It began to travel up her arms, and she backed away as the first of the two leaned forward from the wall, ice cracking as its frozen braid split, stuck to the stone.
Duras pulled her behind him, clapped two warriors of the

fang on the shoulders, and raised his sword.
"As one," he said and made a downward stabbing motion with his weapon, waving the others toward the left while he angled toward the right. "Now!"
Before the bleakborn could gain their feet, Rashemi steel pinned them to the wall. Duras held one alone. The other was pinned at the shoulders. Both grew stronger from the attack, feeding on the warriors' body heat. Duras looked to Thaena as frost crawled up his blade.
Anilya acted quickly. Grabbing a torch from one of the Rashemi scouts she tossed it into the lap of the bleakborn on the left. The two warriors holding the undead stared at the durthan as if she'd gone mad. Even before the torch landed she
was whispering a spell, her hands tracing the guttering flames in intricate movements. The undead grew flush and more lifelike, trying to reach for the blades in his shoulder.
Thaena followed Anilya's lead. The torch's flame changed from bright yellow and scarlet to shades of white and blue. The bleakborn groaned and thrashed as the heat became cold.
The ethran scooped a handful of snow in her palm and tossed it across the undead. Every place the snow fell it sparkled and spread, becoming a second skin of ice and frost. The bleak-borns' movements slowed, and the two women stepped aside. Thaena waved more of the fang onto the landing.
"Destroy them now," she commanded. "Quickly!"
They rushed in, hacking at the frozen bodies, dismembering them into piles of icy parts. Shivering, Duras freed his sword and fell back.
Thaena placed a hand on his shoulder as they waited for the fang's work to be done. She winced as the once recognizable bodies disappeared in a flurry of flashing steel and cursing oaths. As Duras's breathing became more measured she caught his eye.

"Are you well?" she said.
Taking a last cleansing breath, he nodded.
"I thought you liked the cold," she added playfully, trying to hide her greater concerns for a moment.
"As ever, my lady." He smiled, then added, "But death remains a cold season I have no wish to experience. At least not in this place, gods willing."
Thaena did not reply, didn't have to. She had no idea why the wychlaren had claimed such an outpost in the first place. Its position along the Lake Ashane notwithstanding, Thaena could imagine many spots better suited to the defense of Rashemen than a cursed city and the citadel that had failed in its defense. With all its dangers, she felt there must be something more to the Shield, a secret she was not privy to as an ethran. Secrets were common among the sisterhood, but the
price paid to keep this one seemed far too high. She hoped the mystery was worth the sacrifice. Knowing her sisters, it probably was.
Anilya walked by them to stand at the base of the next flight of stairs, looking impatiently between them and the frozen bits that had once been living men. As distasteful as Anilya's presence was to her, Thaena agreed with the durthans sense of haste.
Taking her hand from Duras's shoulder, Thaena took the silent cue. The procession filed past the scene, their moods at once strengthened by the scent of fresh cold wind and darkened by the ruined bodies of their fellow Rashemi. Anilya's sellswords gave both bodies barely a second glance, keeping weapons ready and cloaks pulled tight.
As Thaena rejoined the marching order, it suddenly struck her to wonder how much the sellswords were actually being paid to take on such a mission... and to what end.

chapter efeueo

The storm howled through tall windows at the tower's top, and a high ceiling arched to a conical dome overhead. The rang took up positions at the two visible exits: one to the west, the wall beyond invisible through the blizzard, the other out onto the bridge that connected with the Shield's larger central tower. It wasn't long before even the stoic warriors of the Ice Wolf pulled furred cloaks tight against the bitter cold.

Duras and Syrolf patrolled the area, looking for signs of recent activity by the Creel. Thaena looked to the west, trying to make out the northwest tower, but quickly gave up. Anilya approached, also staring hard toward where their quarry might be encamped.

"The blizzard will cover their tracks," Thaena said, loud enough to be heard over the wind.

"True," the durthan replied, "and the Creel are as accustomed to the season as we are."

"Why are they here? Why this place?" Thaena eyed the durthan, studying her ornate mask and posture, looking for any sign of deception. Though the masks hid their faces, she had grown accustomed to reading body language while learning with the wychlaren. Signs like fidgeting hands or shifting feet could reveal much, even when the face was hidden and the eyes unreadable.

"Who can know?" Anilya answered. "I suspect they are pawns for the power that I followed here. Though for all we know, this leader is Creel as well. A powerful shaman or wizard."

The tone of her voice was too flat, too conversational in Thaena's ears.

"You don't believe that, do you?" she asked.

Anilya hesitated before answering, as if gauging her own thoughts on the subject, but Thaena suspected she could also be deciding how to keep hidden something she already knew.

"No, I don't," the durthan finally said. "The Creel are known to be dangerous, rumored to be ambitious, but are rarely considered a real threat. The power that I sensed was a threat."
Clever answer, Thaena thought. Informative and still evasive.
There was conviction in the durthans voice, but Thaena wondered at the depths of that conviction. Many among the wychlaren were quite adept at controlling what honesties their bodies lent to their voices. Thaena imagined the power-hungry durthan were even greater masters of their own secrets.
"You realize," Thaena said, "when this is over, you will be the threat once again."
Anilya's head lowered and tilted away from the ethran. Thaena could imagine the condescending smile behind the mask.
"The only true threat to Rashemen," Anilya began, raising her head to meet Thaena's stare, "is having the power to destroy its enemies and not using it."
The ethran narrowed her eyes and returned her attention to the winter storm. The answer was essentially a summation of the durthan sisterhood's philosophy, but it seemed far too pointedly said to be a mere statement of opposition. Alarmed by the tone in Anilya's voice, Thaena glanced at her warriors, noting the size of the fang against the durthans sellswords. The groups were evenly numbered, but not so evenly matched.
The berserkers had shown themselves to be much more vicious in battle. Returning her stare to the western wall, she wondered what Anilya could be planning—or if she was truly planning anything at all.
"Light!" Syrolf s voice called from the bridge to the central tower.
Thaena turned and rushed to Duras's side, following his gaze to Syrolf on the bridge. Mist swirled across the span and

snow flew sideways in the whipping wind, obscuring the runescarred warrior. He stood pointing toward the tower with his drawn sword.
The central tower itself was little more than a gray silhouette in the distance. But briefly, between gusts of snow and mist, Thaena saw a small flickering illumination directly across the bridge.
"It's them," she said, feeling her own thirst for vengeance rise to the surface as if all the dead from downstairs stood with Syrolf, pointing and crying out for justice.
"Or it's a trap," Anilya said, approaching from behind, then added as she looked to Duras, "I thought the central tower was too damaged."
"The lower floors, from what I could judge, yes," Duras replied, "but the upper floors could very well be strong still."
Thaena considered this a moment, noticing the durthans sudden cold stare despite her earlier conviction.
Perhaps it is a trap, she thought, or something Anilya does not want us to find—or both.
"We will treat it as a trap then," Thaena said, deciding upon a course of action. "Anilya and I shall lead. Our magic can give us a degree of protection and destroy the Creel's element of surprise. Agreed?"
Anilya glanced once to the western wall exit, the look speaking volumes to Thaena, though it answered few direct questions. The durthan then nodded and joined Thaena at the edge of the bridge.
The fang formed up behind them, the sellswords alongside. The group began a careful march toward Syrolf who smiled grimly and stood aside to take his place behind the ethran. The cold wind sweeping across the bridge bit fiercely, a wintry beast of icy teeth and claws of snow.
Making ready for whatever lay ahead, spells ordered themselves among Thaena's thoughts. Though far from Rashemen, her magic was still formidable.
An arched doorway appeared through the snow, a blot of

darkness within which the weak light of a flame burned. The bridge ended upon a circular landing, a large chamber visible through the open arch. Warriors formed up on either side of the door—the steaming breaths and fierce visages of the Rashemi on one side, the calm assuredness of professional sellswords on the other.

Slowly, she and the durthan entered the tower, forearms crossed in front of them, palms down in a spellcaster's stance. A few steps in they both stopped, scouting every inch of the chamber. The wychlaren had not yet breached the central tower. Tattered threads of tapestries hung from rusted hooks. Pieces of furniture lay crumbled to splinters and dust, leaving only corroded bits of metal intact. The windows here were high above, numerous and smaller than in the previous tower. The torch that had drawn them burned in an old wall sconce and illuminated the only other exit from the room—yet another darkened doorway.

Thaena breathed out in frustration.

"There is nothing here," she whispered, but kept her stance all the same.

"Someone lit that torch," Anilya said. "Perhaps your vremyonni friend?"

Thaena did not answer, merely continued through the room toward the door. Anilya kept pace, and Duras led the others inside.

Beyond the door a dark hallway extended through the tower's

center. Thaena suppressed a shudder, her imagination creating shapes moving through the shadows. She shook her head and blocked these out, sure enough that reality would craft far more convincing things for her to see in time. The passage widened, and she could make out a faint light in the distance.

The glow of more torches lit the chamber beyond the hall. Sweeping stairways curved along the walls from the balcony she stood upon, down into a once grand feast hall or

meeting place. Bones lay scattered across the floor, representing enough bodies for her to envision the battle that must have once taken place here. Nothing moved. Shadows danced and climbed the walls and stairs in the light of torches across the way. Even the air smelled stale and lifeless.

At the other end of the room, matching stairways rose and wound toward a second balcony almost a full level higher. Thaena squinted into the pits of darkness at the edge of the torchlight. No other exit was visible. The opposite balcony was very near the ceiling, and swallowed in darkness. Duras stood behind her and pointed the fang toward both sides so that they could secure the stairways on either side of the lower balcony.

"I don't like this," he whispered.

Neither did she. The Nar were being subtler than she had expected. She was bothered by something, a scent or perhaps just instinct, but the air felt thick with magic. Duras joined Syrolf at the stairway, waiting for Thaena to make a decision on their next move.

A steady noise drew her back to the first chamber. She turned back into the central corridor. Edging closer she made out a labored breathing and recalled the noise she had heard in the entrance hall—the disembodied breath and the whispering of the Shield's shadowy spirits. Peering into the room from the darkness of the hallway, she watched in horror as a robed woman staggered into view from outside.

The woman was dressed in the furs and leathers of a Creel, her face a pale white, her eyes and lips shocking shades of blue.

Thaena held onto her spell. The Creel woman seemed ready to collapse at any moment.

Noise erupted behind her, and Anilya screamed. Thaena felt the Weave twitch as Anilya cast a spell. Sounds of battle echoed from the walls. Still watching the Creel, Thaena prepared a spell herself, heart thumping in her chest as the

attack they had expected arrived. She whipped her head back, seeing only a chaos of moving forms and bright lights, then returned her attention to the strange newcomer.

Coughing and stumbling, the woman's eyes bulged as weak puffs of steam escaped her lips. She fixed her stare on the ethran, hatred in her eyes, but helplessness in her expression. The skin on her forehead split and burned, revealing a pale scar in the shape of a strange sigil. She fell to her knees in the center of the room and leaned back, screaming as white light burst from her mouth and eyes.

Thaena fell back in horror, her spell lost as the woman's body tore apart in a thunder of energy that shook the walls. A wave of frigid air and ice chased the concussive force of the blast, knocking the ethran onto her back. Dazed, the sound of cracking stone roused her and she crawled toward the ice slick that had formed close to the explosion. The woman was gone, the floor a crumbling ruin that dropped away into darkness. Dust and snow drifted in the open space between Thaena and the bridge that had brought them here—the bridge from which they were now cut off.

Staring at that span of stone her eyes were drawn to a figure standing at its edge. His white hair flowed in the howling wind and his sunken eyes regarded her with a gaze that passed straight through her. Ivory skin matched the ancient armor encrusted with snow and ice. She was lost in his stare, a glare of purpose that sent chills through her body, numbing her senses. Before he turned away, Thaena noted the design on the man's breastplate—a leafless black tree on a circular red field, the standard of Dun-Tharos.

He disappeared into the snow and mist. "Thaena!"

Duras's voice broke the odd trance in which she found herself, her head aching and her ears whining from the blast. She pushed herself to her feet and leaned against the wall for a moment before rushing back to her guardian and the others.

Duras met her at the balcony, his large frame silhouetted

against a wall of glowing ice. The torches on the other side of the chamber provided the glow. Anilya, shaking out her hands and flexing her fingers, had apparently provided the ice. Safe for the moment, Thaena took in the scene and considered their options.

"How many are there?" she asked, striding forward to glare at the ice wall that separated them from their attackers.

"Not many," Duras answered. "Some archers on the higher balcony. A few others along the opposite stairs."

"They have a wizard," Anilya said.

A heavy rattling sound reverberated through the chamber, shaking the floor and walls as a large shadow reared behind the ice. Long and sinuous, it slid over the ice wall like a lamprey seeking a soft patch of skin. The shadow receded, growing smaller for a moment before rushing toward them. It cracked against the ice wall, shaking the room again and creating weblike cracks around the point of impact.

"And that?" Thaena asked, wide-eyed.

"Bones," Syrolf answered as he approached from the stairway, his voice unusually calm—a sign that many might misconstrue as non-threatening, but to a berserker it was merely the first stage of the battle-lust. "Wizard summoned them just before the wall went up."

"What was that explosion we heard?" Duras said. "I thought I heard you screaming."

Thaena looked away from the writhing shadow, blinking as the situation came into focus.

"The Creel destroyed the entrance hall," she said, recalling the newly open pit behind them and the bridge beyond. "We're trapped."

The shadow slammed into the ice wall again, this time followed by several smaller impacts. The tiny shadows of arrows could be seen embedded in the ice.

Thaena pictured the tower in her mind. The lower levels a ruin, the path to the bridge now a gaping well of stone and ice created by a Nar woman's sacrifice.

These Creel are mad, she thought.
"And they are trapped as well," she said aloud, then to Duras, "Prepare the fang. Be ready when that ice falls."
He held her gaze for a moment. All that could be said was understood as he turned to join the berserkers on the stairs.
"Your strategy?" Anilya asked when they alone stood on the balcony.
"They are ready to die," she said and crossed her arms to match the durthans stance. "That's why they're here. We should be prepared to do the same."
"Fair enough," Anilya replied, flinching as the beast thudded once again against the wall, then she added, "But if we don't have to? Are you prepared to do what is necessary?"
Thaena found herself staring at Duras, sword in hand, ready to charge down the stairs. His dark eyes turned to her, and she could not bring herself to think of not looking into those eyes again. She turned to the durthan, heart thumping in her chest, anger in her throat, and fear creeping through the back of her mind. In the end she found the decision surprisingly available—almost easy.
"Do what you must," she said coldly.
"For the good of Rashemen," Anilya said, a dark smile in her eyes as the ice wall split down the middle and began to crumble.
Yellowed fangs burst through the ice, revealing the skull of some fiendish beast at the end of a whiplike neck of bones. A
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row of spines lined the thing's jaw and long horns swept back from its equine head.
Thaena fell back as the thing lunged and crushed the balcony's railing between its teeth. Anilya had her back to the wall, her voice summoning things that the ethran did not wish to contemplate. Thaena's own hands began to twist and turn as she cast, her voice echoing in the space between stone and ice.

Arrows flew from the opposite balcony and through the hole in the ice, but clattered harmlessly to the floor. The Creel archers would be useless unless their creature opened the wall further. The bone-beast thrashed against the ice, pushing its way through as it unleashed a rattling growl from the bones in its throat. Finishing her spell, Thaena opened her mouth to roar back.

Her voice rose in a powerful scream, the sound amplified by magic into a thunderous roar. Everyone covered their ears, the warriors backing away from the ice wall as it cracked and fell, shaken apart by the ethran's shout. The wave of sound produced rippling spasms through the undead beast. Bones fell away and broke apart in midair—only to be pulled back into the serpentine form's interlocking pieces.

Anilya completed her spell, and a black swirling cloud appeared over the head of the beast. As the last of the ice wall crumbled, the berserkers led the charge down the stairs with a war cry. The sellswords loosed arrows up into the higher balcony to slow the bows of the Creel and keep their wizard busy.

The durthan spun her hands with the growing cloud, her head rolling on her shoulders. The darkness took shape and groaned with monstrous voices. Lurching forward, the beast's head swung back and forth as it faced Thaena. Studying the swaying bones and the fanged skull, she began another spell.

It lunged again and she rolled to the side, whispering magic. The massive head crashed into the floor of the balcony, cracking the stone where she had stood. Rising to
one knee Thaena threw her hands out, releasing a fan of flames to engulf the skull and neck of the bone-serpent. Fires leaped to life among the dried bones, but the beast merely drew back to strike again.

From above, bits of Anilya's cloud broke away. Shreds of darkness, shaped into floating robes and gnarled claws, moaned as they flew through the chamber. Yells and curses

echoed from below, the pile of bones at the base of the undead beast producing grasping arms and biting skulls. The fang hacked at the bones even as half-formed skeletons surrounded them. Thaena could not see Duras among them.

Glancing quickly at the serpent, she ran down the stairs, casting as she neared the bottom. The whoosh of flames and the rattling of bones followed her descent. Heat pressed through her cloak as the skull neared and she completed the spell. A shimmering shield of force appeared over the warriors even as another volley of arrows rained down from the Creel's balcony.

The arrowheads flashed as they touched the shield, most of them deflected by the enchantment, but many still found their marks. Several sellswords and berserkers cried out as they were struck and then pulled down by the swarm of bones and skeletons. Before Thaena could react, bone jaws clamped on her legs and hips, lifting her into the air. Floor and walls fell away as she was lifted higher and shaken like a rag doll. Pain erupted in her left hip, a fang pressing her hard against a blunted tooth in the bottom jaw.

Smoke entered her lungs and flames licked at her skin. Her stomach turned as the chamber swam before her eyes, blurring as the beast shook her from side to side. Crackling Are and screams filled her ears as she fought to conjure a spell.

Her vision filled with spots of blackness, the pressure making her nauseous and dizzy. She struggled to breathe in the smoke and heat. Between one bone-jarring shake and the next she felt certain she would die here in a room full of bones. Anger gave her a measure of renewed strength. She gripped her hands together, her left holding tightly to a small pearl ring on her right as she fought to mouth the words of a spell.

The serpent raised her high, bones rattling and turning in its neck as the fangs opened wide to get a better grip. She fell, rolling to the back of its throat, screeching the last of her

spell. The pearl crumbled to dust that became a large, cloudy gray sphere of swirling air. Obeying her will, the sphere slammed into the skull, shattering teeth and bone as the jaw closed. Darting left and right, the sphere demolished everything it touched, snuffing out flames and breaking the bone-beast apart.

Broken pieces of the jaw continued to bite and snap ineffectually. Thaena held tight to bones inside its throat as the bone-beast reared and shook. She could see the floor far below as she fell forward, clinging to a broken tooth. Concentrating on the sphere's flight of destruction, she watched as half the skull was ripped apart into flying shards. The neck collapsed, bones clattering against the walls of the chamber as the sphere of wind hurled the bone-beast's bits away from the whole.

The grasping limbs and skeletons below faltered as the sphere tore apart the magic that had created them. Many melted back into the serpent's body as it attempted to maintain its shape, but the berserkers destroyed them. A few arrows still fell among the warriors, but far fewer than before and with much less accuracy. A shuddering rattle passed through the undead form, a tide of snapping bone that pulled painfully at the ethran's shoulders and elbows.

She slammed against the stairs, fresh pain erupting from the wound in her side. Her fingers slipped from the tooth and she fell as the undead-serpent disintegrated around her. She hit the stone floor, and the wind was forced from her lungs. Bones rained to ground, burying her legs. Choking for breath, her vision fading, she tried to raise her head to find Duras. The

berserkers still fought, advancing up the stairs as bloodcurdling screams echoed off the walls.

Pain flooded Thaena's senses, and her head fell back even as Anilya appeared over her, kneeling down with outstretched hands, her dark eyes glittering behind her mask.

Beyond the durthan, high above, shadowy wraiths swarmed around the ceiling and dived one after the other into the Creel's balcony. Each dive preceded a scream, and though bile rose in Thaena's throat at the method, she relished the sounds of her enemy's fear and pain.
Anilya's voice whispered words of magic, her mask and dark hair merely a blot to Thaena's half-lidded gaze. The durthans spell mingled in the cacophony of noise as the ethran's haze of pain drew her into oblivion.
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(jleaming eyes peered at Bastun. Tiny hands, dark and translucent, reached out and caressed his robes, brushing against his skin. Bastun shivered, each touch carrying the chill of the grave, but he did not resist. He kept moving forward. Ghostly chains rattled from their wrists. The manacles left scars that only the dead could bear. These he observed carefully, wincing at each chill-inducing touch. Their spectral bonds seemed familiar, but he had not yet placed the memory, and without knowing what they were, dealing with them could be dangerous.
Glimmers of light drew him to an open room, the light from his staff reflecting on walls coated in ice. Steps measured and slow, he made no quick movements lest the spirits become angry. He indulged their curiosity with feigned complacency. Anything to keep their voices—and their painful intrusions into his private thoughts—at bay.
He counted seven of them, these childlike ghosts embedded in the walls of the Shield. In their quiet pleading whispers he detected bits of their language, words in ancient Nar that provided some insight as to their origins, but little else.
Through long halls and dark stairways he marched, surrounded by the spirits, studying them and being studied by them. The smallest slipped around corners just ahead of him. Her bright eyes kept a constant watch as he followed the

vremyonni markings on the walls. He had tried to speak to her, but this had angered the others. A long, very tangible cut on his right arm was a testament to the pain they were capable of dealing. Spells lay but a whispered word away, and he was growing weary of the constant presence of the spirits. If their previous encounters held true, their curiosity could only last so long before madness once again set them upon him.

Stepping out of the hallway, he breathed deeply as the space between himself and the walls opened up. A flight of descending stairs lay at the opposite end of the room. Moving toward them he kept his head down and his eyes up..

The spirits withdrew, keeping to the shadows of the hallway as Bastun widened his stride, noting the vremyonni mark on the top step. The significance of the spirits was secondary to his pursuit of the Breath. Taking the first step, he heard their cries and growls become louder, more agitated. Looking over his shoulder, he saw their forms churn at the edges of his light. They hovered just inside the previous hall. At their center stood the largest, an older boy with dark brown hair and eyes of smoke.

Not waiting for the attack to come, Bastun bounded down the stairs, casting as he did so. The growls became a roar, a chilling gale that shook the walls. The lesser of the spirits gave chase, rushing like black water across the stone and reaching for his robes and his hair. They hissed and whined as he swung his staff at them, the illumination briefly keeping them back.

At the bottom of the stairs he whirled, completing the spell. A sphere of searing light shot from his hand, hovering in the stairwell and burning any ghost that neared it. Searching quickly, knowing the sphere would only hold them back for so long, Bastun studied several doorways until he found the vremyonni mark. As he rushed toward it, the shadows screamed. Their smallest had disappeared, no longer leading

Bastun through the Shield.
A wooden door blocked his path, and he found it locked.
Not hesitating, he summoned his axe blade in mid-chop, hacking and kicking at the door until it flew open. Another short flight of stairs led him still deeper into the citadel. The sphere of light flickered out, and a wave of darkness crashed into the wall. At its center, chains reached and pulled, propelling the spirits toward him.
Jumping down the stairs, he kept the glowing axe held high. Curving walls led him south to an open door. Ten strides away he started chanting, seeking a more permanent solution to the spirits. They grew closer, scratching at the walls, rattling chains and shrieking in demonic voices that no child's throat should have possessed.
He tossed his axe ahead of him into the chamber, gripped the doorframe with both hands, and shouted the last of his spell. Glowing energy flashed and spread outward, tracing the walls and floors in an ever-widening circle. The chains disappeared, the shadows faded away, and furious voices became the quiet weeping of scolded children before they silenced altogether. This last caused him a pang of sudden guilt, imagining the pained face of the little girl among their number.
He waited, searching the stairwell, but they were gone. Staring a moment into that darkness, he wondered at his concern for the long-dead and helplessly mad children. Resigning himself to his task he knelt to retrieve the axe-staff.
Raising the axe's light high, he found himself in a round chamber, eight large doors lining the walls. Carved into the floor and each door was the arch-within-shield standard of Shandaular. The nearest of those doors stood open, and he could see spears leaning against the walls, arrowheads scattered on the floor.
"An armory," he whispered.
Searching the room, he spied the vremyonni rune softly

glowing above the fourth door on his left. Approaching cautiously, he studied the floor for footprints in the dust. Nothing—but such things could be obscured by those with the knowledge or magic to do so. He knelt to examine the marked door's lock and curved handle. No markings lay upon either, nor corrosion for that matter—an addition made by the vremyonni. The lock appeared simple and almost ornamental, though the fact that it seemed unengaged gave him a jolt of fear. Bashing it in like a berserker was practical, but patience and spells might have told him much more. Reaching for the handle he took a deep breath.

As his fingertips brushed the door a spark of heat caused him to flinch. A moment later the door exploded in a flash of white. Stumbling backward, tiny particles of ice scoured his mask and stung his eyes, blinding him. Wind, snow, and ice blasted the area around the door, but his entire body felt awash in flames.

When it finally ceased he eased his eyes open carefully. The floor around him was covered in white from the blast, but not a single flake of errant snow was left on his robes. Mystified, he brushed at his sleeves, a slight dampness becoming a steamy mist, drying as he watched. The Ilythiiri-runed ring upon his finger caught the light of his axe, and he eyed it curiously— protection against the Shield's ice traps?

A creaking sound drew his attention to the door, now opened just a crack. He wasted no more time on his miraculous lack of injury and entered the dark room beyond. Bronze and iron reflected his light. Swords, axes, spears, daggers, and shields hung on every surface and covered the floor. Many were bejeweled and carved with silver runes, some made of precious metals. He ignored them, bait left simply to misdirect those foolhardy enough to hunt for treasure. The real treasure, if he was not too late and the scrolls were to be believed, lay elsewhere.

A tiny mark in the center of the room, the vremyonni

symbol, summoned him forward and down to his knees. The floor stone was small and cut like every other, save for the mark only those of his order could see. Keffrass had described
the Breath to him, and he had marveled at the tale. Still he wondered at the path that had led him here, to the place his master had always spoken of in fear and awe.
Reaching down, he wedged his fingers around the edges of the stone and lifted it carefully up. He set it to the side. Placing his hand inside the hollow beneath he felt the leather-wrapped handle of what he had sought and pulled it free.
Covered in dirt, the wavy blade bore intricate symbols and crude markings. Holding it in both hands he inspected the sword with a mage's eye. Sharp to the touch, it was nothing like the weapons that surrounded him. Forged by wizards and enchanted by King Arkaius of Shandaular himself, the Breath was the key to the Shield's most powerful weapon—the Word, a weapon that had marked the end of the city.
To Bastun's knowledge, Keffrass had been the last person to lay hands upon the sword before the wychlaren had laid claim to the Shield as their outpost. He had always meant to return, to study the altered runes of the Ilythiiri and try to dismantle them, but his responsibilities in the Running Rocks prohibited it. In the meantime, the Breath remained hidden, buried, and spoken of only to the othlor and those hathran deemed worthy. And Bastun.
Bastun's knowledge of the Shield's secrets had been his greatest treasure for many years, a gift from an old man who had seen something in him that no one else ever had—potential.
Holding onto the Breath for a few moments longer, satisfied of its safety, he dipped the point of the sword back into the hole. With the blade halfway in he felt the floor shake, and the walls shook. Eyes wide, he froze and listened. Dust fell from the ceiling, and he could hear the edges of tiny cracks

popping as they grew in the stone. Alarmed, he turned around, raising his staff.
A thin cloud of dust filled the outer chamber, and a crash from above sent more spilling from the ceiling. He stood, the Breath in one hand, his axe-staff in the other, as the sound faded to faint and distant rumblings. In the brief silence that followed, a second sound reached his ears—the scuff of a boot on loose gravel.
A silhouette appeared outside the room. Bright eyes regarded him through the fog of dust, and he could make out the sound of a slow, measured breath—the breathing of a thief on the prowl or an assassin before a kill.
"Ohriman," he said, his earlier relief fading in the face of reality. He felt foolish for indulging his fears—and even more so for believing, however briefly, that he had been alone save for ghosts and memories.
"Vremyonni," the tiefling replied. He stepped into the light, a thin blade held at his side.
"How did you follow me?" Bastun asked, stalling for enough time to prepare a defensive spell. Ohriman seemed in no hurry, though his cat-like eyes did wander to the ceiling more than once. "The haunting in this place is quite formidable."
"Yes, the ghosts," Ohriman said, standing his ground in the center of the room. He appeared casual save for the sword. "Terrible little fiends, aren't they?"
The walls shook yet again. This impact felt closer. Larger chunks of the ceiling fell, and stones the size of walnuts bounced in the dust. Bastun didn't answer, raising his staff as he lowered the Breath to his side. He took one long, cleansing breath, preparing himself for the next few moments. Ohriman raised an eyebrow and smiled as he surveyed the growing cracks above them.
"Well, no matter to me. Your witches have a knack for keeping little beasties like that quiet and out of the way. I like having them around, long as they're paying me no

attention." He held out a hand. The glove upon it was of a black cloth and held a barely perceptible nimbus of shadow. "Now, I suppose I can guess your answer, but considering the reputation you have among your friends upstairs, I'll ask anyway—"

"I will not give you the Breath," Bastun said.

Ohriman nodded, smirking as he did so. "Have your own game to play?" he said, eyes narrowing. "I can respect that."

The tiefling lunged, his blade lightning-quick. Bastun parried the strike with his axe blade and swung the Breath in a wide arc. Ohriman skipped backward, spreading his arms and smiling as he gave the vremyonni space to join him in the central chamber.

Accepting the pause, Bastun stepped out from the weapons room, quickly surveying the tenuous integrity of the ceiling and detecting movement to his right. A deep darkness leaked into the room, crawling at the edge of his light. As soon as the Breath crossed the threshold, the returning spirits whined and growled. He ignored them and circled the tiefling. Ohriman snarled and came again.

They traded quick blows, and Bastun struggled to match the tiefling's speed. He didn't dare drop the Breath to free a hand for spellwork, so he was limited to what lay within the axe-staff. Calling upon the power he had, he managed to trap Ohriman's sword in the curve of his axe. Bright blue-white sparks leaped from the weapon, singeing the tiefling's hand, and Bastun slashed the Breath at Ohriman's legs. He cursed as Ohriman jumped nimbly out of the way, freeing his blade.

Though the shocking spell had done little damage, he pressed the slight advantage, bringing his axe to bear again. As another thunderous impact shook the room, Ohriman kicked the flat of the axe away and tumbled backward, dodging a large chunk of stone. Dust, rocks, and ice showered from the newly made fissure.

The tiefling rolled into a crouch, licking the back of his

singed hand with an obscenely long tongue. Steam rose around his lips and he smiled.
Bastun circled around the cloud of dust, considering his options. The exit was several strides away, but he had no way of knowing how much damage had been wrought to the tower.
As if mirroring his thoughts, the spirits drew closer, circling the pair, though their shining eyes remained fixed on the Breath.
"Walls falling down, little ghosts sneaking up from behind." Ohriman smirked and stood, his head low as he moved forward. "You've got more skill with a blade than I gave you credit for, wizard. But you can't hold out for much longer."
"Perhaps you're right," Bastun said. He regarded the Breath and the cloud of dust flowing around his feet, then resumed his battle stance. "Then again, perhaps I can hold out just long enough."
Ohriman charged, blocking Bastun's axe to the side and aiming his attacks at the vremyonni's sword arm. Fresh pain lanced Bastun's forearm as a strike pierced through his defense. He fell back, maintaining focus, but hard pressed by the tiefling's furious assault. Close to the wall he turned his axe toward Ohriman, keeping the Breath behind him. Shadows on the wall peeled away as the ancient blade neared them, the ghosts screeching to escape its presence.
An ominous crash resounded from above. Bastun compromised his own defense, yelling as he thrust his axe at Ohriman's chest. The tiefling's sword sliced into his shoulder, just under the leather guard beneath his robes. Bastun ignored the wound and rolled to the side. A massive stone block broke away from the ceiling and smashed into the place where Bastun had stood. The sound was deafening, the dust blinding, and he fell on his injured shoulder. Pushing himself up, he had only gotten to one knee before Ohriman kicked him in the back.
Down again, he choked on dust, fighting for air. A boot

crushed his wrist. Shadows screamed in his ear as the Breath was pried from his fingers. Growling, he rolled and swung his axe, but the nimble Ohriman easily leaped out of the way, the Breath in his possession.

Amidst crumbling walls and howling spirits, Bastun got to his knees, shaking with fear and pain. More of the ceiling crumbled as Ohriman dodged left and right, making his way to the only exit.

Where is your breath?

His master's lesson took on a more ominous meaning as he raised his hands and began casting. The magic came quickly, calming his nerves as he resolved himself to what must be done. His hand shot out, emerald energy gathering as he aimed for the ceiling above the doorway.

A thin green line of light shot from his fingertips, cutting through the stone and destroying any support it had left. Bits of debris fell first, giving the tiefling pause before the ceiling disintegrated and caved in. Ohriman fell back as rock and dust covered the path, sealing them inside. He turned around, madness in his eyes at the realization that they were trapped, then spied the open door behind Bastun.

Bastun followed the desperate logic: the smaller room might provide some protection from the collapsing ceiling of the armory. He didn't pause in his casting to consider that safety just yet. The Weave flowed around him as he took up his axe and stood before the small room. One way or another, the Breath would remain buried.

Ohriman charged, intent on bowling him over, but Bastun's spell finished first. Several chunks of stone floated from the floor around him, spinning and whirling. He sent the first flying toward Ohriman's legs. The tiefling dodged, but the movement slowed his rush to safety. Before he could recover, Bastun hurled the rest all at once, his will directing their flight.

One smashed into Ohriman's temple, bloodying his face. The next slammed into his shoulder, spinning him, but he

continued to move forward. Then one struck his chest, and another his stomach, knocking the wind from him and doubling him over. The tiefling stumbled forward, gripping his stomach and baring his teeth as he drew closer.

The ceiling between them buckled with another impact, but Ohriman kept moving. Seeing the Breath so near again,

Bastun allowed himself a brief moment of hope and gambled on an idea. Straining, he focused his spell on a heavy stone. Lifting it into the air, he sent it flying in a wide circle, slamming into Ohriman's back. The tiefling fell just before the crack in the ceiling gave way.

Amidst the chaos of noise, Bastun noted the loudest of the stones' grumblings yet. The entire structure shook, and it seemed only a few scant breaths remained before they were buried. Crashing to the ground, Ohriman's grunt of pain was lost as a shower of stones thundered into the chamber. Dislodged from the tiefling's grip, the Breath clattered to the floor near Bastun's feet. Scooping it up quickly, Bastun backed away as Ohriman leaped to his feet. With the last of his spell, Bastun closed the door to the weapons room and leaned against it. Hearing the latch click, he stood resolutely as Ohriman closed the distance, sword flashing barely a stride away. Bastun held his breath and reached back to brush the door handle.

The trap sprung as quickly as before.

Freezing cold burst around him, showering Ohriman in shards of ice and bone-chilling wind. Cuts split the tiefling's face, and he raised his hands against the spell, dropping his sword and slipping to the ground where the magical cold formed thick ice around his legs. The mysterious fever burned across Bastun's flesh, painful but protecting him against the ward's icy breath.

Pushing the door open, he ducked inside the room as the ceiling buckled with a final groan of weakening rock. Ohriman fought to free himself, frozen to the floor as the tower gave in to collapse.

The old metal door slammed shut, and Bastun pressed himself against it, keeping as close to its frame as possible. Tons of stone thundered down in the central chamber, crashing against the door and rattling his teeth. Weapons shook from the walls, clanging to the floor. Cracks appeared to either side of him and he shoved the Breath into his belt.

Reaching into his pouches he retrieved a pinch of sparkling dust. Whispering the spell quickly, he felt his skin harden and grow thick. A gray discoloration spread over his hands and arms, giving them the look of iron.

The entire room shook, and he prayed to the Three as the stone above him split. Debris bounced off his shoulders and arms, the spell protecting him for now, but he hoped the magic would not have to contend with much more.

The back of the room collapsed in a cloud of dust and the door broke from its frame, leaning against the ruin outside. Stones and rock fell for what seemed like forever, until the light from his axe-staff was all but completely obscured. An image (lashed through his mind—himself lying buried for years in rubble, clinging to the Breath as he was dug free. Screams hid behind the chaos of destruction and, thinking of the spirits, he feared he might actually witness his own exhumation.

The rumbling faded, walls groaning as the structure adjusted to the collapse.

Laying against the door, he stared up into a new darkness. The chamber outside was gone, the weapons room half-buried, leaving him in a small space filled with dust and rock. He listened to each creak and pop in the settling stone, waiting to be crushed at any moment. His shoulder suddenly ached, the wound remembered after the chaos.

Afraid to move, he endured the pain a little longer, resting his aching body, and took slow breaths as the dust settled, waiting to see if the Shield would bury him as it buried all its secrets.

chapter Thirteen

What did you do to her?" "What had to be done."

Thaena's head hurt. Noises seemed too bright and, as she tried to open her eyes, light seemed too loud. Duras was a blur, leaning over her, holding her shoulders. She heard his voice, knew his touch. Her relief was bittersweet as she remembered where they were.

"She's coming around," she heard Anilya's voice from somewhere to her left.

"Thaena," Duras said, "can you hear me?"

She coughed. Her throat was dry and aching from the cold. Duras pulled her up slowly. Her head swam, as if she were still swaying and turning in the fangs of a giant skull. He held her in a sitting position as she waited for the nausea to subside. His grip was strong, fierce, and warm.

"You are welcome, Rashemi," Anilya said before turning away.

"Duras," Thaena croaked, then cleared her voice. "What did she do?"

"I don't know," he said, bringing a waterskin to her lips. "It doesn't matter now. You're fine. The bleeding has stopped."

She ran a hand along her thigh where the bone-beast had bitten her. Fearing her leg would be gone, she was surprised to find smooth skin, clean and whole, albeit a little numb. She

drank more of the water and held her arm out to Duras, who carefully raised her to her feet. Finding her balance, she felt refreshed. Her leg had no pain. In fact her entire body, once aching and bruised, seemed restored.

Looking around she found the chamber empty and quiet. Only the faint sound of the wind outside and her own breathing disturbed the silence. Bones lay scattered around the floor as before, but now they were broken and splintered beyond what time had done to them. Raising her eyes to the high balcony, she felt the heavy silence. There were no arrows to fall or archers to loose them. All were gone and

swallowed by shadows.
"We are trapped here?" she asked, afraid of his answer.
"We checked the rest of the tower," he said, his voice low and bordering on grim. "Every floor below this one has collapsed."
"I feared as much." She looked back toward the hallway at the top of the stairs, remembering the woman who had died, sacrificing her body to keep them in this tower.
"But the Creel are defeated," Duras said.
"It doesn't matter," she said, her voice feeling stronger. "They were going to die anyway. They came here for that purpose."
"I don't understand." Duras took his hands from her shoulders, turning her around to face him.
"I watched a woman, back there," she said, pointing to the hallway. "She gave herself to keep us here. She destroyed herself for whatever cause these Nar have come for."
Duras didn't answer, merely stared at her, trying to understand.
"This wasn't just a trap, Duras. It was... a sacrifice." "Then it was a meaningless sacrifice," he said. "We're still alive."
Thaena looked away and crossed her arms. She couldn't help but feel that more could have been done. It was on the tip of her
tongue to suggest returning to Rashemen, getting help from the hathrans, and returning with a larger force, but she couldn't say it. She loathed to return in defeat—a vremyonni exile escaped and a wychlaren post lost to the Nar. The Creel could be given no quarter, no time to finish what they had planned.
"You're right," she said. "We are still alive, still here, and we must make something of that—at any cost."
"Any cost?" Duras said, though she could see something else in his eyes and his bearing. He looked over her shoulder, and she turned to see Anilya above them on the stairway, looking out the eastern window.

"We will not suffer wolves at our gates, Duras. We will do what we must for Rashemen."
"This isn't Rashemen," he replied. "Just an old castle."
"You know what I mean," she said.
"And you know what I mean." His voice rose sharply, then softened. "You're starting to sound like her."
Lowering her head, Thaena did not reply. He spoke truly, and she could not deny that truth. There was something in the durthan that she respected and at the same time feared. She saw something of the same growing in herself, an anger that could only be sated in her enemies' blood. Looking around, she saw naught but bones on the floor and flickering torches on the walls. She had no monstrous shadows on which to blame her emotions, and though her old self loathed the feeling she could not deny its usefulness.
"Where are-the others?" she asked.
Duras said nothing. She placed a hand on his arm, squeezing just enough to let him know his words did not fall on deaf ears.
"Preparing a climb," he answered finally. "There is a small ledge on the inside of the collapsed chamber we can use to reach the bridge. With some rope and a little time..."
"Good," she said, eying Anilya. "We'll go as soon as they're ready."
She listened to him walk away, then let out a held breath and ascended the stairs toward the durthan. Reaching the window she saw the snowstorm had lessened. The wind barely whistled as snow piled within the Shield's walls. The durthan did not move, but stood staring out into the white nothingness. Before Thaena could break that silence, Anilya spoke.
"They don't understand, wychlaren."
"They?"
"The warriors," Anilya said, still watching the falling snow. "Your berserkers, my sellswords. They fight for vengeance, honor, blood—"

"And gold."
"Yes. My men have less passion perhaps, but they know quite well which end of the sword earns their pay. But they don't understand the magic in this place, the power that hides in the walls." Anilya turned to face her. "Not like we do."
"Do not liken me to your understanding, durthan," Thaena said, still contemplating her conversation with Duras. "I sense nothing but what the Creel have awakened here."
And what brought them here? she thought. Suppressing a shudder, she recalled the frozen figure on the bridge and the eyes that had chilled her very soul.
"Do you think the Creel awakened the darkness here?" Anilya asked. "Or was it hathran magic that kept it hidden, existing beyond their notice, sleeping and ignorant, until the hathran were... removed?"
"I fail to see how that matters now," Thaena answered.
"When this is over," the durthan said, "when the Creel are gone, their mysterious leader dealt with, and your hathrans return to their precious outpost, perhaps then it shall matter to you more."
"As I recall, it was durthan magic that summoned those wraiths during the battle."
"And it was out of respect for your authority in this that I gained your permission before doing so," Anilya said. There was no anger or defensiveness in her voice.
Thaena looked away, shaking her head for falling into the durthans logic.
"It was the right decision, Thaena," Anilya said. "These Creel are fighting a war here that we don't understand, making sacrifices more like fanatics than mere raiders. We must match them if we are to succeed."
"And what then?" Thaena said, though she feared the answer, a justification that might ease her troubled mind. The durthan returned to her window view, her secret thoughts, and the swirling snow. Thaena looked upon her

enemy and ally with new eyes. It wasn't just philosophical opposition that separated them, but the knowledge that, deep down—in the darkest wisdom of the oldest othlor—the durthan could be right. "We could fall as well."

"Before I answer that, think about the path that lies ahead of us and the blood that still must be shed," Anilya said. "Then ask yourself if you really want to know."

"Ethran!" SyrolPs voice echoed in the chamber, startling Thaena from contemplating how to answer the question. "We are ready."

She ascended the stairs, returning to the place where she had watched a woman die and seen eyes of ice in a face far colder than winter.

Berserkers and sellswords parted as Thaena and Anilya entered, making a path that revealed the dark abyss that now dominated the chamber. Wind and snow entered through the open door at the opposite end of the pit, flakes tumbling down and down into darkness. Duras and one other stood near there, already across and double-checking the ropes placed along the curve of western wall. The room seemed far larger now than before.

Syrolf reached for the rope to begin his climb, but Thaena stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"No," she said. "I shall go."

The warrior nodded reluctantly and let her pass. The ledge was as narrow as Duras had said, merely bits of the stone floor clinging to old supports. She gripped the ropes tightly and began to climb across. There were spells that might have made the process easier or quicker, but she knew the fang needed to see their ethran's strength, her resolve. A simple climb for such rugged warriors might be a little thing—there were far more treacherous stretches of terrain in Rashemen—but a leader must lead.

Holes pocked the walls, most filled with ice and bits of stone from the blast that had taken the floor. Thaena focused on her hands and her feet, ignoring the long drop that yawned

beneath her. At two-thirds of the way she paused, hearing something echo from below. A growl reached her ears, a tiny far away sound. She moved more quickly, looking toward Duras who reached out his hand, ready to grab her.
The growl grew louder, and the walls began to shake.
"Thaena!"
She heard the voice of Duras as if in a dream. She moved her hands along the rope, finding another foothold, then glanced down, beyond her boots. She reached farther, closer to Duras. Her foot, overextended, slipped on a loose stone and she fell.
The ropes held, though they shook with the walls. The stone she had knocked free fell away into the blackness. The growl receded, growing softer and disappearing. The shaking calmed, but Thaena could not reach the remaining ledge. Her fingers barely held as she raised her leg higher. Her right hand slipped.
The moment became an eternity as her weight shifted, her legs dangling. Her eyes looked downward, and she imagined she could see a tiny light down there waiting for her. Something caught her wrist. Her arm jerked straight and the plummet was over before it had begun. Duras had her.
Pulling her up, Duras grabbed her with both arms and rolled away from the pit. She breathed deeply in his embrace before meeting his eyes, seeing him once again from the other side of death's door. They stood slowly, her arms and legs shaking, but sure and strong as she faced the others. The ropes had held to their iron posts, and the worst seemed to be over.
She crossed her arms and dipped her head with true Rashemi pride.
"Who's next?" she asked, the challenge in her voice bringing a smile to the face of Syrolf as he took the ropes and found a foothold.
+ + + + +
Flakes of snow drifted into Bastun's light, settling on his

robes and slowly melting. The scent of fresh air was both refreshing and alarming. Peering through the crevice just above him, he wondered just how much of the Shield had come crashing down.

Satisfied that the rubble was done with its settling he reached up for the edge of the fallen door and pulled himself toward escape. The others no doubt believed him either far from Shandaular or working against them. The durthan would be awaiting the return of her assassin, and with him the Breath.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled and pushed himself higher. Stone scraped his sides and tore at his robes as he climbed. Keeping the light of his staff ahead of him, he found himself thoroughly buried. Still, flakes of snow managed their way to him, swirling and falling on a distant breeze. Searching the roof of broken and shattered rock, he found what he hoped for. Through a small hole above he could just barely make out a faint gray light.

Trapped in a space far too narrow for his body, he wedged an arm back and fumbled at his pouches. Feeling a cylinder of cold metal he pulled it free and held it up before the light, reading the markings along the side of a silver vial.

"Silver is impractical," his fellow apprentices had said. He uncorked the vial, recalling their jibes.

"Well, it doesn't shatter easily," Bastun had replied.

Pulling his mask up, he tipped the vial to his lips and drank the bitter-tasting liquid within. The magic of the potion coursed through his body, pulsing and rippling through his limbs. His robes and equipment became as light as air, changing along with his body into an amorphous plume of living smoke. Transformations such as this were usually uncomfortable, but the lack of stone jutting into his back and legs was invigorating.

Swimming on the air he slipped through the ruin, flowing through the hole and several others beyond. He was drawn toward the light and soon found himself floating above the

massive pile of rubble. The distance upward was quite far. He must have been below the Shield's central tower.
Broken stairways and dangling doors hung from the walls. Large chunks of ice remained frozen to the stone, collecting the snow that fell from above. Voices echoed from somewhere, but he couldn't make them out, the magic of his mask lost in his current state. The potion would not last long enough for him to reach the top. He would have to wait for the effects to wear off.
Somewhere within his shapeless body was the ancient blade, the Breath, now free of its secret grave. The magnitude of such a well-concealed legend on his person was astounding, and he couldn't help but think of the Firedawn Cycle and the lyrics he'd heard once for every year of his life.
... to steal the Breath, to seal the Death Of the Shield and speak the Word. Of the Shield and speak the Word.
Once again the Breath was to be stolen from the Shield and, he imagined, by those who did not understand what they were stealing. Even hcidid not fully understand the relationship between the Breath and the Word—their strange merging of Nar and Ilythiiri magic—only the destruction that the two were capable of. As he considered, shadows gathered at the edges of the rubble, coalescing hands and bright eyes as the child-ghosts observed his spiritlike form. Their clinking chains and faint whispers echoed around him, but they did not attack.
Seven children in chains, he thought curiously.
The Cycle came to mind again, and the ancient lyrics revealed another of the Shield's dark secrets. Pity flooded his being, seeming to carry a palpable weight as the potion wore off. His hands felt the stone beneath him, his knees pressed under the growing weight of his returning body. The Breath pulled at his belt as the song tumbled through his thoughts.
They came at dawn to break the wall, by Seven

were they led. To frozen walls and to weary core, Seven cross'd
the plain,
To gates of Shandaular, of fallen kingdom, Seven came.
Shattered souls, bound in chains, by Nentyarch's crown, the Seven came.
"Children," he croaked as his throat reformed. He coughed, acclimating his lungs to breathing again. "He sent children to start his war."
The whispers grew louder and more frenzied as the shadowy spirits shifted in and out of the walls. Standing and turning in a circle, he reached for the Breath, wary of the ghosts. He recalled their fear of the weapon below when he was fighting Ohriman, and though he pitied their fates, he would protect himself against their madness if need be.
Coming back around he froze, finding the smallest standing just a few strides away. She appeared as before, pale and dark
haired. Her bright eyes regarded Bastun with curiosity and also the same odd familiarity he could not fathom. She reached up and he flinched, her movements quick and hard to follow. Touching her continually flowing hair, she brushed away several errant strands and traced her face.
Reaching up to his own face, he traced the edges of the mask in wonder.
The mask, he thought. They must have known the vremyonni caretaker! How could he have kept this secret? Lived here among them?
Even as the question occurred to him he suspected the source of that secret and sighed in understanding: the wychlaren. They would have guarded the knowledge of anyone succeeding where they had failed.
He kneeled down to her eye level. She shied away from the movement, fading for an instant, but did not leave. She averted her eyes from him, hiding her face behind an ivory hand. The others kept their distance, still agitated and

confused by the strange meeting between the living and the dead.
"You were sent here to die," he whispered.
She looked back at him, tilting her head as her eyes widened and her lip trembled. There were no more tears in her—they were left behind with her physical form—but he could see the streaks of those she had cried in life. Pleased with gaining her attention he tried to keep it, to discover why she had come to him.
"You said something before, about the cold prince," he said.
A shudder passed through her and the others rumbled. Their chains clinked and clattered against the walls. Shivering and paler than before, she nodded just enough for him to notice. Her eyes drifted to the Breath at his side, his hand upon the hilt.
The prince, he wondered, from the Cycle?
History lessons turned through his thoughts. Late night conversations with Keffrass came to mind, along with old scrolls and bits of forgotten lore. Narrowing his eyes, he recalled the Creel. The tribe, though often perceived as mere savages, were obsessed with ancient legacies and boasted of powerful bloodlines. The idea was there, on the tip of his tongue, before the realization struck him. When he found it, the name was linked as closely to the history of the Shield and as far away from the present as the ghost that stood before him. "Serevan Crell," he whispered.
Mere mention of the name had an instantaneous effect. The girl disappeared. The others' forms grew and trembled, a thundering growl emanating from the shreds of shadow they had become. The walls shook, and he thought he could hear a scream echoing amid the sound of tumbling stone and rubble. Standing on the largest piece of intact floor he could find, he held his arms out for balance and turned in circles again. He prepared for an attack.
Gradually, the shaking stopped, the growls faded, and though the spirits still hovered at the walls Bastun breathed

a sigh of relief. Cautiously he knelt, taking stock of the situation. Staring up to the distant light near the top of the tower, he knew he would have to find Thaena and the others. Anilya would lead them to the Word, likely using them as fodder against the Creel.

For several moments, he contemplated the alternative—taking the Breath as far away from the Shield as possible and abandoning his old friends to their betrayer and the Creel. The long years away were apparent in that he didn't immediately reject the idea. Without the Breath, Anilya couldn't use the Word. Wasn't that what mattered?

Still... having an idea and acting upon it were very different notions. He couldn't abandon the Rashemi.

The low growls and whispers around him became tiny whimpers and fearful noises. The shadows shrank, sinking to the edge of the ruined tower's many floors. Looking around in confusion, Bastun rose cautiously back to his feet.

A cracking sound echoed from above, followed by a crash as shards of ice shattered on the stone. A mewling wail drew his attention to a block of ice on the wall. Something squirmed inside of it—a dark mass of long limbs writhing in an icy prison until a pair of glowing green eyes turned toward him from within. Raising his staff, Bastun flinched as more ice fell from behind him.

Claws scraped against ice, and leathery wings unfurled.

Taking a deep breath, he called upon his axe.

chapter Fourteen

I374 DR, Year of Lightning Storms The Running Rocks

njoying the quiet and the smell of old books, Bastun stood alone in the center of his small room. Fresh snow melted on his boots and dripped from the hem of his robes. No one had seen him leave. No guards came to witness his return. Two days alone, beyond sight of his fellow wizards and the laws that bound him to remain hidden from the world. Free, more than he'd been in nearly two decades, and he had returned to the Running Rocks.

He was vremyonni, currently the youngest of the Old Ones, and no other place in Rashemen would have him. This was his place. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and lashed out. His knuckles met the stone wall. The familiar sting lanced through his wrist, and his fury subsided for a moment or two, blood welling into old cuts and scratches.

"Welcome back."

Keffrass's voice did not startle him. His master was as much a part of the Rocks as the whistling drafts in the upper caverns or the pages rustling in the library.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," Bastun answered, then recalled the brief escape. A return to his village under cover of night and magic had shown

him more than he'd been willing to admit for many years—that he would have left anyway, in time. "And... yes."

"A good answer," Keffrass said and entered the room, sitting and lighting a candle with a wave of his hand. "There is wisdom in looking back at every regret, every misstep, and realizing the value of tragedy."

"I do not think I am quite that wise just yet," Bastun said and leaned against the wall.

"There is wisdom in that as well," Keffrass replied, his ancient eyes sparkling, though his humor faded. "That mask... it does more than just cover your face."

"Yes," he said quietly, closing his eyes and feeling the second visage. "Though I fear it, what it may become, what it will allow me to do."

They sat in silence, no longer master and student, but colleagues and friends in the same order. Bastun flexed bleeding knuckles beneath his sleeve, the fury he had cultivated within himself always a heartbeat away, a weapon as much a part of him as any spell. Keffrass's teaching had forged that weapon, shaped it from raw emotion and skill, but Bastun had to live with it.

"You're going back, aren't you?" Bastun said, knowing the

answer, but needing to hear it all the same. "To Shandaular, to the Word."
"Perhaps, though only the othlor can say for sure." Keffrass stared into the candle. "There is something out there for us all, waiting in the dark for us to discover—and fear." He turned to Bastun, his eyes gleaming in the candlelight, full of meaning and wisdom. "We must face it alone, that abyss, in whatever form it takes—beast, guilt, magic... or the past.
"Deny it and it will devour you. Make you forever a part of it." He stood and made his way to the door. "Face it, accept it, and it will become a part of you, inseparable."
"What's the difference?" Bastun asked.
The old man paused, raising an eyebrow and looking sidelong at his former student. "Your choice."
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Nightal2, I376DR, Year of theBentBlade
Wings, teeth, and a thrashing barbed tail descended in the wake of burning green eyes.
Bastun snapped his fingers, summoning a burst of light into the thing's face. It shrieked, faltering in its dive, but fell just within reach. He buried the flashing axe blade in hairless gray skin, bringing the struggling beast down to flop and bleed on the rubble.
He had but a moment to study the body before more creatures attacked, but it was enough: nearly the height of a man, emaciated and light bodied, with wings in place of arms.
"Varrangoin," he murmured. He cast another spell, a brief emerald glow surrounding him as the fiend's skin cracked and popped, spraying acidic blood in all directions. Though it hissed and burned on the stone, the blood splashed him harmlessly.
The sound of fluttering wings filled the air, their echoes bouncing off one another in a frenzy. Beyond them lay the only escape—a gray light casting the unnatural flock of varrangoin in silhouette. Bastun's thumb found the worn

scar in the staff. Closing his eyes, he felt the weight of his mask, heard the memory of his master's voice, and made a choice.

Exhaling a long breath, control and reason slid away, freeing his mind and sharpening his instincts. Opening his eyes, he was no longer vremyonni, no longer truly himself. He was merely the mask, the axe, the magic, and the crystal clear rage of the Rashemi.

Thrusting his arm at the center of the descending swarm, a bead of light flew from his fingertip. It disappeared among them. He ran across the broken stone, leading them in a circle. Arcane words poured from him, a harsh poetry of magic that blurred his form as he charged into the living mass. Crashing

around him, the varrangoin swirled as an explosion rocked the tower, a ball of flame erupting within the flock. The ground shook, debris fell from the walls, and Bastun found himself in the chaos.

Broken bodies and burning blood rained down as he dived into the nearest of the varrangoin. Caustic fumes burned his nose as stone melted. The survivors rallied quickly, and still more broke free of icy prisons above.

Claws raked his arms and scraped at his mask and leather armor, but they brought the varrangoin too close. His blade slipped through their forms, hissing with the blood of one even as it slew another. Stingers struck stone where he'd been standing, claws found only air as he sidestepped. The rage consumed him, filled his body with strength and his spirit with bloodlust. He reveled in the freedom—in the rhythm between steel and magic. He shouted in their fang-filled faces, laughed as they spit streams of acid from glowing maws. His laughter became a chant and the chant became thunder.

Lightning blasted outward, leaving the twitching fiends to fall and flounder.

As the blue-white glow faded, others escaped, clinging to

walls, their green eyes full of hunger and violence. Turning slowly, whispering spells through a grim smile, he watched them regroup, shrieking at one another in a fiendish tongue. They leaped from the walls from all directions. Waves of tingling energy washed over him as his stomach lurched and gravity changed direction.

He plummeted upward, the fiends screeching as they funneled into a flapping spiral in his wake. From a pouch, he pulled a fistful of pebbles, shaking them like bone-dice as he chanted and scattered them like seeds. The tiny rocks grew into boulder-sized chunks of rock and plunged through the tornado of leathery wings.

Emerald light filled the darkness beneath him as the fiends scattered, smashed by the falling rocks and crushed against the ruin below. Their shrieks reached beyond the stone-cold demeanor of the mask to the calm that dominated the center of his being. He stopped his freefall, drifting toward the wall and rolling on the stone before finding balance again.

Standing, his senses swam with a momentary vertigo. The tower appeared as a long tunnel, pale light behind and crawling darkness ahead. Shaking his head, he waited as the survivors, those still able to fly, rose from the chaos to find him. He couldn't let them escape—a small flock of varrangoin could become hundreds within months, thousands in a year.

Less than a dozen remained, slow in their ascent and splitting into groups. Directing each other in their odd croaking language, it seemed they were regaining their wits after such a long hibernation in the ice. Letting go, gravity turning in his gut like a giant's fist, he fell to the far wall. Two varrangoin fell to his axe, a third scoring his mask as it spun out of the way. He led the others back down, leaping from wall to wall, before changing direction and ripping through two more as he ascended.

They floundered behind him, diving beyond reach of his axe,

though the unnerving sound of beating wings grew uncomfortably close. A sudden impact nearly took his breath, and he tumbled with the fiend, freefalling toward the top of the tower. The varrangoin's stinking breath burned his nose as he fought to breathe. It raked his shoulders, teeth snapping just over the handle of his axe. He growled as he fought to keep the fangs at bay, shifting the fall and pushing it toward the stone.

Just before hitting, his defense slipped and he felt the hot piercing sting of the fiend's barbed tail bite into his side. There was no time to cry out as they slammed into the stone. He managed to swing his axe as reality twisted and rolled around him. He heard the varrangoin scream and saw it falling away, one slashed wing twitching as it disappeared into darkness. He quickly rose to one knee and winced at the blinding pain in his side. Looking over his shoulder, the top of the tower lay far
closer than he'd expected after the last fall.

Rising to his feet, aching joints screamed in pain as the beast's poison took hold. Spasms wracked his muscles and he struggled to hang on, to ignore the pain long enough for one more effort. Screeching in excitement, the rest of the flock drew closer, their chase almost at an end.

Breathing raggedly, he fumbled in his robes for a small clump of rose petals. He forced out the words of the spell, intoning them carefully and timing the syllables to the nearness of the varrangoin.

Just as their eyes dimmed in the light of his axe, their needle-sharp fangs glistening and long tails twitching, he tossed the petals in the air before them. The air shimmered and grew thick, slowing the creatures. They sniffed and blinked, wings beating at the air sporadically, faltering as they shook their heads, making sneezing noises. Drifting back, one by one, their glowing eyes fluttered as an arcane slumber overcame them.

Bastun wheezed as the rage left him. He lay shaking in a

pain that grew by the heartbeat. He crawled, barely hearing the faint sound of bodies smashing against the rocks below. The gravity spell kept him from joining the fiends, but it would not last indefinitely.

Reaching one hand over the edge, he pulled himself up, raising one leg onto the floor just as his other fell straight with the normal pull of gravity. His stomach turned, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Flexing his fingers, forcing them to work, he removed his mask. Rolling slowly onto his side, he began pulling pouches from his belt. He made a pile, studying the contents of each pocket. Shivering with fever, he picked at the items, finding the things he needed, cursing and talking to himself.

"Leave Rashemen? Live by my own rules? Find honor in my own battles? Excellent idea, Bastun." He groaned, tremblingas spasms churned his gut. Grasping a small flask of liquid, he set

it aside and kept at his search. "Trade one isolation for another, leave pointing fingers and dishonor for undead soldiers, frozen corpses, tiefling assassins, and flocks of Abyss-spawned acid-spewing demon-bats."

With a handful of herbs he whispered a cantrip, then set them down carefully as they began to smoke and smolder. As the herbs charred and the smoke lessened, he collected and crushed the ashes. Pouring them into the flask, he closed it and shook the contents to mix them.

"Well," he said, teeth chattering, "here's to adventure."

He tipped the flask to his lips and downed as much of the mixture as he could before coughing and spitting. The foul taste of the Rashemi firewine and the burnt herbs flooded his mouth and nostrils. He had come by the idea of using jhuild as a catalyst for simple potions quite by accident, finding some of the stuff left behind by fellow apprentices. Its nearly poisonous properties made it an interesting candidate for treating poisons found in nature and elsewhere. Unfortunately, when enchanted by the right

herbs, it became the antidote equivalent of cauterizing a severed limb.

Flashes of pain shot through his body, and he fought to contain his screams. Throat burning and blood boiling, he felt as if he were melting. Pain shuddered through his body. Bright spots danced on the inside of his eyelids. He fell onto his back, letting the potion take hold, breathing deep as fresh snow melted on his cheeks, joining the tears that streamed from his eyes.

Time disappeared as exhaustion replaced pain. Though his mind was alert, he waited for feeling to return in his extremities. The rage-state left him tired, but the release and the comfort it gave him was exhilarating. Few others had trained as he had, studied the magic that he wielded—the magic that he sometimes feared wielded him. Vremyonni were expected to be quiet and studious, lead lives toward those endeavors, but Keffrass had led him to the place he needed—the anger that yearned for battle.

Where is your breath?

No time, Bastun thought and tried to sit up.

Blinking in the pale light, he breathed evenly and took in his surroundings.

An open door lay at the other end of the room, allowing the weather to drift inside and down into the pit he'd just escaped. Snow was piling there, and he could make out fresh footprints that had not yet filled in. Behind him was a short hallway. Torchlight flickered beyond. Wincing, he sat up and gathered his things, replacing his spell components and items in his pouches and pockets before rising to his feet.

He donned his mask again. This he did with much thought and a brief pause, staring at it, through it, then letting it cover his face. It was the symbol of an allegiance he no longer carried, but by necessity and the magic it held, he would bear it a little longer.

He explored the hallway and the massive chamber beyond.

Bones covered the floor, broken and suggestive of some sort of lost shape. Snow piled here as well. Falling through windows along the staircases, it laced all it touched with white. But for the wind, only his footsteps disturbed the silence in the room. It was a grand hall, high and likely once adorned with all manner of decoration and tapestries. This was the home and the study of King Arkaius and, Bastun imagined, the bjrth-place of the Breath and the Word.

A faint sound disturbed his thoughts, drawing his attention to the high balcony. Cautiously he ascended the stairs, his legs aching with each step. The noise he heard seemed a slow, rasping breath—a dying breath, and one he'd have missed without the mask. Peering over the top step, he found the source of the breath and the eerie silence.

Bodies covered the floor. Dressed in the furs and armor of the Creel, the fallen warriors lay unmarked, no sign of blood around them. Pale scars graced their arms and faces, the edges like streaks of frost-burn. Bows, arrows, and
swords were strewn around. At their center was one in dark robes bearing a rune-covered dagger—a priest or wizard. The breathing came from a young woman lying against the balcony's rail.

She did not move or seem to notice Bastun's approach. Like the others, he found no blood around her, but she was weak and appeared to be dying. Taking no chances, he kicked her sword away, the sound causing her eyes to flutter open. Kneeling down to eye level, Bastun made sure his axe was visible and doused its light with a whispered command.

Her eyes widened and her hand slid along the floor, searching for her lost blade. He was surprised by her sudden liveliness, having underestimated her condition. She tried to push herself up, and he raised the axe and murmured a spell. Waving his hand, he shouted the last of the spell, summoning glowing bands of force that encircled her wrists and throat. Bound against the railing, she snarled and struggled, but her strength quickly failed.

Getting comfortable, Bastun sat and laid the axe across his knees. Meeting her eyes, he spoke in Common.
"We will have words, you and I," he said. He briefly squeezed her throat with the spell. Wheezing breaths escaped her when he released the grip, but she smiled, baring her teeth like a trapped animal.
"A word will indeed be spoken, wizard," she hissed. "And neither of us will speak again."
"What word is that?" He sensed a pride in her bearing that could work in his favor.
"The last word," she said with a smirk, "the word of the Prince and the old blood."
"This Prince, he brought you here?"
She drew her lips into a thin line, frowning and looking away defiantly. She struggled against the spell again, causing Bastun to raise his axe and slam its shaft against the floor. Its light blazed in her eyes.
"I have magic that can wring the truth from you if you like," he said, "but it will not be pleasant."
She stared at him, considering her alternatives before answering. "No," she said, slumping and shivering in obvious pain. "We came to him. Those of us who believed."
"Why? Why is he here?" Bastun kept his voice firm, but he was not quite prepared to believe that a two-thousand-year-old prince of Narfell had drawn anything to himself but rot and dust.
"Our priests say that he searches for the Breath." Her voice bespoke the passion and the fury she felt. "That he covets the Word, and that he will summon a cleansing flame, returning the long lost empire to our people... the bloodline... will rule again."
Madness, Bastun thought as the woman shuddered and tensed. Her head lolled to the side, and she mumbled. He stared in wonder, looked at the bodies around them, and shook his head in disbelief.
"The Creel are as lost as we are," he whispered. "There is no

flame to summon in this place. They have no idea what they're doing, what they're dying for."
"We die for the promise," she murmured, her eyes rolling. "The old Order... twilight... failed us. Their old man is dead. Prince Serevan rises with a promise... of power."
The moment the name was spoken Bastun grabbed his axe. Rising slowly, he watched the shadows around the woman deepen and grow thick. Tiny hands gripped her legs, little fingers digging into her flesh. The children screamed as she stirred, and her pitiful cries joined them. They roared and wrapped their chains around her, pulling themselves out of the stone and pushing themselves through her.
Bastun looked away and stepped toward the stairs, careful not to gain their attention. He could not help her, had no magic that could harm the spirits now. His quiet prayer for her quick death went unanswered. Her cries followed him down
the stairs, back to the hallway, and drifted past him to bury themselves in the pit of the tower.
He rested his hand on the Breath and stared across the pit at the long bridge. His old friends would die if he left them and took the Breath as far away as he could manage. The durthan, if she survived, would look for him. The man, the prince, or whatever it was calling himself Serevan Crell, would fail, might search for Bastun as well. The Creel tribesman would remain, hold the Shield, and perhaps convince the rest of their tribe to join them. The wychlaren would come for him, the vremyonni also. These thoughts raced through his mind, analyzing the paths and possibilities open to him.
"I would become the exile they believe me to be," he said aloud, staring into the dark void beneath him. "Not one drop of Rashemi blood on my hands, and I would be hunted as a murderer and a traitor."
Tiny whimpers reached him, echoing from the far side of the room. Peering into the shadow he could see the faint form of

the little one, huddled against the wall and staring wide-eyed toward the gruesome scene that played out in the room at his back. She was so much like the memory of his sister—an echo of a past he could not change. A simple dare—to spy the wychlaren of the Urlingwood—had sent her away from him and forged the life he lived amid rumor and accusation. When Keffrass was slain and the Shield scrolls stolen, the groundwork of his apparent guilt had already been laid by his foolish childhood game.

He'd never mustered the courage to challenge their perceptions of him—had never cared to defend his own honor.

"This last thing," he said, walking to ropes that still hung along the side of the pit, "then freedom."

He grabbed the ropes, found a foothold, and edged himself along the wall.

"Win or lose. In body"—the cries of the Creel woman faded away, leaving only the wind to answer him—"or in spirit."

chapter Fifteen

Xnow, lit by the eerily silent lightning, painted the path before Thaena. She and the fang pushed through the wind and piling snow. The first of three guard towers along the west wall was hidden by a storm that slowed their march to a crawl. Duras forged a path just ahead of her. There had been a silence between them ever since their conversation in the central tower. It was a silence she was loathe to break, but she feared giving it room to grow. Between the thunder and the wind she had excuse enough not to probe the subject for now. Love or no, she could not justify stopping to mend their misunderstandings.

A feeling of dread grew within her with each step. She felt out of time and in a place she did not belong. The same could be seen on the others' faces. The alertness of the impending threat seemed overshadowed by a growing paranoia. She had tried to attribute this to the presence of the durthan or the absence of Bastun, but she had been

touched by the shadows of this place and felt the madness that hid in its walls.
The northwest tower, a tall spire of unassuming architecture, loomed in the distance.
Despite its cursed reputation, she had never suspected the Shield to be much more than as Duras had described it—just an old castle. As an extension of Rashemen's defenses it served a vital purpose, but the city itself made its strategic value to an enemy almost negligible.
Squinting through the snow, she could barely see the outline of the first guard tower coming into focus. After a few more steps, she paused, reaching out and grabbing Duras's arm. The procession stopped and Anilya approached from her side. Thaena held up a hand to shield her eyes from the snow, peering at the figure that stood before the tower doors.
He came closer, and she found the eyes she had seen on the bridge, ice white and full of a dull, glowing power she could not describe. He spoke, but she could not make out the words. Duras raised his sword. Syrolf walked alongside him, shouting something in his ear.
Lost in the figure's compelling eyes, Thaena barely noticed that all the sounds around her had ceased. Anilya shook her shoulder and she did not respond. Duras turned, reaching for her and saying something, but she did not hear him. Only a gentle wind filled her mind. She knew the cloaked warrior did not see her. He looked through her and through all of them. His whispered spell was meant for another, some other time, but it found her all the same.
She stumbled to her knees, wanting to weep without knowing why. The man seemed so like herself in those moments, lost in time and doomed to wander the unknown, trying to make the world fit into neat little rows that fell apart and unraveled no matter how hard he tried. The magic that held her sat like a weight in her chest. Her senses screamed for her to stand and lead her men, but her limbs

would not obey.
Duras and Anilya moved sluggishly to stand before her. The fang rushed forward with swords drawn. Flakes of snow, so swift just moments before, tumbled gently between her and the gaze that held her, crashing around her like boulders. The figure, this royal warrior of iced armor and regal bearing, gestured like a general in battle and turned with a skull-like grin on his suddenly shifting features. A lump formed in her throat as his eyes were lost and he disappeared inside the tower.
Blurs of movement caught her eye at the tower's top. Several night black gargoyles sat in hunched poses on the crenellations. Their skin, so like the color of a clear evening sky, shimmered in the falling snow. Pale, white eyes fixed like sickly stars between long, curving horns. They trembled in place, as if reality fought to remove the nightmares that roosted in its firmament. She struggled to recognize that she was in danger, but she could not focus through the trance that gripped her.
Anilya's hands danced on the air, twirling in the motions of magic. The fang charged as one of the beasts took wing, followed by another. Duras grabbed her shoulder, tried to bring her to her feet. He shouted words that were lost in her mind, stretched into syllables that bounced off one another into obscure, distant sounds. All she could hold onto was the image of ice blue eyes staring at her through the storm. She felt her mind crumbling.
Black wings flapped overhead, their color broken by brief slashes of sharpened steel as the battle erupted. Thaena watched as they dipped and rose, disappeared and reappeared elsewhere. One of the durthans sellswords fell screaming, a beast pinning him against the stone. It lowered its indistinct face to the flailing man, its horrible visage melting into smoke and shadow to engulf the warrior's head. The screams were muffled. The flailing arms slowed and fell still.

Thaena rubbed her hands together in frustration, tying her fingers in knots—a habit she had not indulged since she was a child. Tears rolled from her eyes and spilled into the corners of her mouth. Her mind struggled to escape, trapped in a labyrinth of magic and false emotion. Snow, swords, and shadowy wings overwhelmed her senses. She recoiled in horror and sadness. The part of her that fought the spell, that knew what was happening, used her voice to scream. Spells slid among her thoughts with a slippery grace, swimming through the cracks of nonsense she could not banish.

Random memories of childhood asserted themselves. She recalled running through the forests with her friends, finding insects and birds, identifying them to give names to the beasts in her world. Few butterflies visited Rashemen, save in the spring, and she did not remember any of them with wings as large and black as the creature that Duras fought a mere stride away.

They are not butterflies, she told herself. I am in danger. We are all in danger. I have to help.

Then the cold eyes overwhelmed her moment of clarity, and again she felt small and confused.

"I wish Bastun were here," she whispered. "Bastun would know what they are."

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Bastun stepped out into the howling wind, cloak pulled tight against the bite of winter, but no such chill came. He leaned into the gale, averting his eyes from the multitude of blinding flakes, and carefully crossed the bridge. Warmth spread throughout his body, and he feared the poison was not yet done with him, but there was no pain. Curious, he continued his crossing, loosening his cloak and marveling at the comfort he felt in weather known to kill the unprotected.

Once again, he gazed upon the strange ring. No Rashemi would need such protection from the winter—not that they would admit anyway. The old vremyonni bore the ring for

some other purpose, something that nagged at his thoughts as he crossed the bridge.
A knot of dread rested in his stomach at the idea of rejoining the others, and he slowed. The Breath was a secret he was bound to maintain. Though he had taken the oaths as a vremyonni, there was no lack of wisdom in keeping the Shield's secrets safe. The durthans presence was proof enough of that. His stride quickened as he contemplated how best to explain his absence. At the halfway point of the bridge, the warmth he felt was pierced by a chill at his back.
Looking over his shoulder he stared through the tower door. The darkness within the tower shifted and trembled, shreds of it licking outward into the snow. He became suddenly aware of the drop on either side of him and the distance back to the west tower. Edging his feet along, he kept a wary eye on the spirits, who had slipped through the walls and were following him again. His heart raced and his breath quickened. The children had not approached him very closely since he had gained possession of the Breath, but as his path would take him toward the Word, he feared the spirits might become bolder. The power between the two artifacts had taken every life, cursed every soul within the city to unrest.
Measuring his steps, he kept one hand on the Breath, counting on its presence to ward off their madness. Whispers and voices came to him on the wind. The spirits' bright eyes regarded him from within their shadows, shaking and turning as if agitated. The voices grew louder, and he realized he was not listening to the children.
Shouts rang out from somewhere to his left. Through the snow he could see nothing, but the familiar hiss of blades being drawn from leather scabbards was unmistakable. Words of magic drifted in and out of focus. A man'scream pierced through the ivory haze.
Preparing to dash the remaining distance, he took once last look behind him and paled. Smoky tendrils reached out from

the doorway, flowing in and out of the snow and along the sides of the bridge. Through his boots he could feel the structure vibrating. Backing away from the tendrils' advance, he tried to think of anything that could stop them. A single voice interrupted his racing thoughts, whispering forlornly through the fog of sound that surrounded him. Most of what was said escaped him, eaten by distance and wind, but one pleading word reached his ears and sent him into a dead run for the west tower.

"... Bastun..."

The vibration in the bridge increased, and he pumped his legs as fast as he could. The snow ahead of him shifted as cracks spread through the structure. He stumbled, swearing an oath against King Arkaius and the magic he had wrought. The familiar sound of crumbling stone erupted behind him, and he cursed the paranoia that had drawn him to the Breath in the first place.

He felt one stone shift as his foot left it and he ran harder. With a held breath and a prayer he jumped.

Far below he heard the shattered bridge crashing to the ground. As his stomach slammed against the landing outside the tower and the air was forced from his lungs, he threw his weight forward. His legs swung over the edge, but he had enough purchase to pull himself forward and regain his footing.

Sounds of battle echoed from the door on his left, and he followed them. Torches flickered dimly in the storm. Men screamed and shouted oaths through the whistling wind, but Bastun's eyes first rested on the thrashing blot of darkness kneeling on the ground just yards away. A living gargoyle torn from night's fabric, the thing shook its victim, feeding and shaking the last vestiges of life from the body. It began to detach itself from the finished meal, its face featureless save for two wide eyes glazed over with death.

The eyes had haunted him from drawings found in dusty old tomes of vremyonni lore. The wings stretched out and shook

—just as he had once imagined they would—as the embodiment of all his childhood fears raised up from his memory to regard him with hunger and a blank black visage. A nighthaunt.

He reached to his pouches, his stores of components and crafted magic, as the beast crawled over the drained corpse.

"Where is Bastun?" Thaena's whisper reached him and vaulted him into motion. The nighthaunt shuddered and pounced.

He abandoned magic and raised his staff, the axe blade blazing to life as he slashed at the thing. The creature changed its direction, twirling in flight with a grace that had nothing to do with wind or wing. Overbalanced by the swing, Bastun fell forward as the nighthaunt's tail whipped his shoulder. He spun with the strike, gasping at the burning touch of the creature even as he rolled into a crouch. He caught a quick glimpse of the others far down the bridge before turning to defend himself again with the axe.

He struck the nighthaunt's wing, feeling it tear through, but the leathery hide mended itself even as it was wounded. It turned and circled, preparing to dive again. Bastun ran, chanting and drawing a tiny bead of tree sap from his pouch. Following the forged path through the snow, he searched for signs of movement in the air.

In a blink it appeared before him out of thin air, rushing forward with gangly arms outstretched. At the last moment he fell flat on his stomach, enduring the pain of claws scratching at his back as the nighthaunt passed over and circled for another strike. Kissing his fist with a prayer to the Three, he hurled the tree-sap bead into its path.

He lost sight of the bead in the snow, but the nighthaunt's circle faltered. It shook its arm as tendrils of the sap grew, entangling its horns and wrapping around its wings. It fell from the air, writhing against the substance to disappear beyond the wall's edge. With a sigh of relief he rushed toward the others.

Screams came to him through the storm high overhead. The creatures were said to on occasion feed while on the wing. Over battlefields and cursed places, dying beyond sight of ground or salvation, their victims fell as a grim, silent rain. He shivered to imagine such a fate.

Closer now he could see the battling shadows through the snow. Thaena's cries drew him to his left. He found her on hands and knees, struggling to stand. Something caught his foot and he tripped, falling on his right shoulder. The body of yet another sellsword lay beneath him. Pushing himself up, his aching limbs straining to keep moving, he watched as a nighthaunt dived for the ethran.

Duras fought valiantly barely a stride away from her, unable to see the looming threat. The spell poured from Bastun's lips on reflex. It was fast, and he had no time to think. Thaenas head turned. She had pulled off her mask, baring the face he had not seen in almost seventeen years. The woman that looked upon him was the echo of the girl he had known, the despair in her eyes crushing him in its intensity.

Magic coursed through his arm, and flashes of light appeared at his fingertips. Motes of blazing brilliance flew from his hand and into the nighthaunt s path. Its eyes blinked, and it shook its horned head to avoid the light that popped and burst in its face. It turned and wheeled away, swiping at the clinging bits of arcane illumination that followed. Though harmless, the spell had been enough for the moment.

More light exploded from his right, and he found Anilya defending her men. Rising to one knee he watched the dtfrthan making slow progress toward Thaena, and fear brought him to his feet. She had not yet seen him, and the spell he brought to mind would put her deception to rest alongside the nighthaunts' victims. The Breath hung heavy at his side as if more substantial in the presence of one who sought its power.

A thud shook the stones beside him. Flinching and raising

his axe, he stared at the body of a sellsword, legs bent at odd angles, face buried in the snow. The hairs on Bastun's neck stood on end, and he whirled in time to catch sight of the nighthaunt before being tackled to the ground. The axe flew from his hand as cold claws found his throat.

Instinctively he held the blank face back, his hands slipping on the nighthaunt s slick, leathery skin. He kicked and squirmed in its grasp, gripping the curling horns and twisting to get away. Beating wings churned snow into his eyes, and

the things long tail whipped around his ankles. Blinking, he managed to see Anilya kneeling close to Thaena, waving her hands in the midst of casting.

"No! Thaena!" He yelled, but the nighthaunt held him fast and pushed with unnatural strength on his chest. He fought for air and strained to hold back the unraveling pit of darkness that erupted between the creature's horns. The pale eyes became pools of shadow, bottomless and hungry. Fine threads of curling black mist stretched and brushed through his mask, tracing thin lines of pain on his cheek. He could feel himself being drawn into the swirling vortex.

He turned his face away, squeezing his eyes shut. Desperate, he let go with his left hand and fumbled through the snow for his axe. The darkness drew closer, drawing the energy from his body. He choked as the emptiness touched him. His flailing hand found nothing, and he groaned before brushing against hard metal pinned against his leg.

Grabbing hold of the object he tugged and pulled it free from beneath him. Swinging blindly he connected with the nighthaunt's head. Bits of horn broke away and bounced off his mask. The shadows disappeared, and his spirit rushed back from the edge of the nighthaunt's dark hunger. Opening his eyes he met the glazed orbs of the beast and swung again, the wavy blade of the Breath biting through wing and shoulder.

The nighthaunt panicked, releasing his throat and legs and

kicking away. Bastun followed, stabbing the ancient blade into the creature before it scrambled out of reach. The beast crawled over the side of the wall and disappeared. Turning back to the battle, he found Thaena gone, but he heard her voice calling out to charge the guard tower.

In the place where she had been Anilya now stood. The durthan faced him with sudden interest in her eyes, her gaze lingering on the Breath before turning to join the others. Her figure became a blur through the snow, silhouetted against the madly dancing sparks of torches in the distance.

Somewhere in the battle, Thaena began casting, sending bright beams of light (lashing through the darkness and burning the circling nighthaunts.

Bastun shoved the Breath back into his belt and forced his legs to move, stumbling through the snow and trying to catch up. He knelt to retrieve his staff and lit his way along the wall, following in the deeper paths.

The figures ahead disappeared, one by one, into the white wall of the guard tower. The storm shoved him from left to right, wind screaming in his ears. The dancing lights blinked out, leaving him nearly blind beyond the reach of his staff s illumination. The slamming of a heavy door resounded like an executioners axe against the block. He passed lifeless figures lying in the snow, but not as many as he had feared —and most were of Anilya's band.

Through the chaos of the winter storm he heard the faint beating of wings. Glimpses of flitting shadows gave him strength, and he quickened his step as much as his aching body would allow. He imagined them circling overhead like giant vultures, licking their wounds, angry at the feast lost in the tower and hungrily eyeing the lone wizard picking his way toward escape.

The tower wall appeared through the windy murk, its door firmly shut. He threw his shoulder against the door, wincing in pain when it didn't budge. He beat on the door with his

staff. No answer came from within. Placing his back to the tower he summoned his axe blade and kicked the door.

The nighthaunts landed on the wall, shaking their horned heads in excitement as they crawled nearer. Half a dozen of the beasts appeared, their bodies like holes cut from the cloth of reality. Voice ragged and throat raw with cold, Bastun managed to summon the words of a spell. A burst of scintillating colors lit the scene and scattered the creatures, buying him a few more moments. He slammed his fist into the door in anger. To break it down would mean death for the fang within. And Thaena.

Turning, he planted his feet solidly and prepared to die fighting, assuming a stooped battle stance and flexing muscles fraught with pain. Sensing his resignation the nighthaunts' wings shivered and drew tight, like the hackles of wolves smelling prey with nowhere left to run. One lunged forward, eager to feed first. Bastun roared and raised his axe, but rough hands grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him backward.

He fell, flailing into the tower as the door slammed shut behind him. Claws raked on the door outside as he was spun around and shoved against a wall. Torches blinded his eyes and his axe was snatched away. A strong arm held him tight, though he had no strength to resist. Blinking fiercely, the blurry shape in front of him came into focus slowly, revealing the runic tattoos and snarling visage of Syrolf.

Bastun froze as torchlight glistened on the cold edge placed against his neck.

chapter sixteen

N° words were needed. SyrolPs eyes told it all.

Too weak to defend himself against the punch to his stomach, Bastun took it and doubled over in pain. The sword at his throat disappeared only for its pommel to come crashing down on his skull. He fell to his hands, vision swimming as the room erupted into chaos.

Shouts and curses surrounded him as Duras tackled Syrolf. Coughing, Bastun crawled against the wall and lay on his side. The fang had become a tangle of legs and arms as supporters of Duras leaped to his aid against those siding with Syrolf. Their eyes were bloodshot and without reason as they punched and kicked at one another. Though a common sight in the berserker lodges, this brawl stemmed from more than simple rivalry.

His eyes clearing, Bastun watched as the floor came alive. The shadows of the combatants peeled away from the stone, growing darker as tendrils reached and snatched. Beneath the curses and shouts he heard the undercurrent of whispers, the nonsensical ravings of the shadowy children as they played in the fertile ground of the Rashemi's minds. The black stream of spirits filled cracks in the floor, bending and twisting as it made its way toward Bastun.

Drawing back against the wall, his hand went to the Breath, making the shadows pull away. Before he could study the effect, the room rippled and changed. Ghostly images overlaid themselves among the fighting Rashemi. Fierce warriors in heavy armor fought with sword and shield through the scene. The faint noise of metal on metal echoed in his mind as if from a great distance. The Breath's steel gripped his hand with claws of ice, compelling him to stand, to skirt this battle and continue on his way to the northwest tower. He fought the will that tried to overcome him and, straining with effort, released his hand from the Breath. As he did the ghostly battle disappeared.

Blood spattered across the floor in front of him, and Syrolf

landed on his back. Duras stood over him, breathing heavily and reaching for the fallen warrior again. Others came from behind, grasping his shoulders and hauling him backward. Syrolf turned over, noticing Bastun, and lunged. Blood poured from his nose and stained his bared teeth as he was stopped as well, pulled away from the prone vremyonni to spit and swear.

Thaena walked up between the pair, reprimanding them with little more than a stern glare and a steady hand. The shouting faded as the bloodlust fled from weary muscles and clenched fists. Duras and Syrolf stood on their own, staring each other down but making no move to continue the fight.

Bastun rose to a sitting position and caught his breath. The whispers died away, and the shadows sank back into the stone, the ghosts' sport now finished as a measure of order was restored to the group. Thaena caught his eye, an unreadable light flashing in her gaze. An awkward silence passed between them, which she quickly broke, ordering men to secure the doors and any other entrances or exits. Wind whistled through cracks beneath the doors and shook the broken windows at the far end of the chamber. Bastun leaned against the wall, clutching his stomach, stars dancing before his eyes.

"Hold him," Thaena said, and Duras stepped forward to grasp Bastun's robe. Hauled to his feet, Duras pinned him to the wall. The warrior did not look at him directly, seeming uncomfortable with the situation but obeying the ethran. Syrolf and the remainder of the fang waited expectantly. Despite the blood on his face and a bruised cheek, Syrolf ignored Duras and kept his gaze firmly fixed on Bastun.

Anilya approached Thaena, barely glancing at Bastun, though she again took note of the wavy-bladed sword at his side.

"I have laid an enchantment that should discourage the nighthaunts," she said calmly as if nothing had happened,

"but the storm is another matter. We might do well to wait out the worst of it before continuing."
Thaena blinked, looking at the durthan before nodding in agreement.
"See to your men, durthan," she said, her tone still even and full of command as she looked sidelong at Bastun. "I will see to this."
Anilya glanced once toward the vremyonni and turned away. Bile rose in Bastun's throat at the durthan's calm exterior. He fought the urge to spit and call her out in front of the fang, but instead closed his eyes to calm and steady his nerves.
They cannot know, he thought. Not yet. Not until I can prove my claims.
Thaena approached him, standing at Duras's shoulder as she looked him up and down.
"Bring him," she said and made her way toward the back of the room.
Duras pulled him from the wall and shoved him forward.
The fang parted for the procession, spitting and whispering in their wake. Syrolf paused before moving out of the way. Wiping blood from his mouth on the sleeve of his tunic, his expression made promises that Bastun had no doubt he intended to keep. He grabbed Duras's shoulder, looking up at him as the big warrior stopped.
"You risk too much, protecting him," he said. "He's using you."
Duras pulled away and led Bastun to an archer's loft at the back of the room. Thaena stood beside the bottom step as the vremyonni climbed the steep stairway. He winced at the ache in his legs. As Thaena and Duras followed, the whispering below them became quiet arguments and accusations. He wondered if he had done the right thing, if he had come to help them against the durthans imminent betrayal or to die alongside them—possibly by their blades.
Stumbling over a loose stone, he fell to his hands, and pain

lanced through his wounded shoulder. Stifling a groan he crawled to the wall and sat down. Thaena ascended the last few steps, his staff held in the crook of her arm. Duras stood at the top step, blocking access to the loft as Thaena paced. With a sigh, she knelt down, leaning on his staff, and regarded him with anger and pity in her eyes.
"Explain yourself, Bastun," she said.
"What would you like me to say, Thaena?" He asked, his voice strained and scratchy.
"Tell me that they're wrong about you," she replied. "Tell me that you haven't betrayed us to spite the wychlaren or your homeland, that you aren't seeking some hidden power or secret of this place for your own gain. Tell me that everything that is happening here is just coincidence... and not design."
"Do I really need to say any of that?" he answered, looking between her and Duras.
"Damn you, Bastun! This isn't a game! Men have died in your absence, and many of those that remain believe you to be involved. Do you understand that? Can you?"
He didn't answer, his gaze drifting to the floor as he reminded himself that he knew to what he was returning. He cursed himself as the reality of what he faced came to rest on his shoulders. Looking up and seeing his two old friends waiting for him to say something, to settle their doubts, he could not
help but wonder if they might have given up on him. "What do you think?" he asked.
Thaena shook her head and gestured over her shoulder where the voices of the fang could still be heard arguing in the room below.
"You know, Bastun, contrary to what you may think about the iron-fisted rule of the wychlaren," she said, just loud enough for him to hear, "what I think may not matter for much longer."
"It matters to me."

Thaena stood and turned away, pacing again. He regretted his words as soon as he'd said them and noted that she had not yet returned his staff. She couldn't know what the item meant to him, but in the spirit it was given, in Keffrass s last moments, it was tangible evidence of trust and forgiveness. Though the staff held some small power he might call upon when needed, neither of them suspected the old blade at his belt represented a destruction beyond their imagination.

"Well," Thaena said at length, "in any case, it won't save your life. That is, if you still care for your own life."

"Of course I care," he replied and shuddered as he recalled the nighthaunt's maw descending toward him.

"Then why did you leave? Why when everything we've experienced here speaks of betrayal?"

"I did what I had to do." Though he wanted to tell them everything, he could not be sure of their trust in him. If they still doubted or took seriously the rumors and accusations of those such as Syrolf, then the Breath would be taken from him. No matter what his warnings, they would know that he had kept it secret and pulled it from its hiding place. He would have played into Anilya's hands perfectly. Despite the trust he wished to earn, he knew he had to lie. "I left to find my own way, my own exile. And... I got lost."

Thaena knelt again, searching his eyes. Duras had remained quiet throughout, tall and still at the loft's ladder. Both of them

awaited something more, more than just simplicity and the understanding of old friends. Together, ethran and guardian, they represented a reality he was loathe to face, though once he had lived it and had survived for some time—he was no longer one of them. They did not need him. They did not trust him.

But they wanted to trust him again. Thaena had called out for him in the dark, and the fear he could see in her eyes, the desperation in her voice, drew from him what she needed to hear. Taking a long breath, he delved into the tale

of his recent absence—a tale of half-truths and dull, ashen lies that tasted bitter upon his tongue.
He told them of the hidden passages, ghostly children, and the secret library. He spoke of a deep armory and becoming trapped in the central tower's collapse. The varrangoin, the climb, the dying Creel, and the falling bridge... all he told, but the Breath and the Word he kept to himself.
"This prince," Thaena said after he had finished, "what do we know of him? I was not aware the Nar had princes—or kings for that matter."
"It is said that in the last days of Shandaular," Bastun said, reciting the bits of history as he knew them, the poetry of the Firedawn Cycle unwound by vremyonni historians, "the Nentyarch Thargaun of Dun-Tharos had sent all but one of his sons against the walls of the city. This last son was called Serevan Crell, a prince of old Narfell."
"You cannot mean to say—" Duras said. "That was centuries ago. Longer!"
Though the warrior had broken his silence, Thaena sat transfixed in her own thoughts. Bastun did not press her on the subject. Clearly she knew something more.
"I can only vouch for what the Creel woman spoke to me," he said to Duras, though he kept his eye on Thaena. "But Narfell was once favored by powerful fiendish lords, and Serevan was suspected a sorcerer of some talent."
"Even if it is true, or even possible," Thaena said, standing and staring at the ceiling and walls as if being watched, "why now:
"Now?" Bastun asked. "You've seen the spirits of this city, the way they act, as if Shandaular is falling every day. The idea of now means very little to those lost in the suffering of the past."
She looked at him—or rather her mask looked at him, for it was a wychlaren stare he felt and not the eyes he had just witnessed outside. There was judgment in the mask and authority to carry out the judgment. For a short time he had

forgotten that mask, and it seemed he was going to be reminded.
"This is not the past, Bastun," she said, an edge like iron sliding coldly along the undertone of the statement. "This is now and we must act accordingly. We cannot be swayed by what might be or what once was, Nar magic or fallen princes be damned."
"And what if it matters?" he asked. "What if those things are a part of this? What if you are wrong?"
She tilted her head and regarded him before replying. "If I am wrong, then why did you come back?"
The cold iron hiding in her voice slid home and buried itself in his gut. Even Duras looked at her sharply. She had done all but call him a coward, and he yearned to answer her question with the truth.
But he didn't. He swallowed his words, gritted his teeth, and allowed the moment to wash through him.
His staff clattered to the ground next to him and he took it with a steady hand. His thumb already rested in the wood's grooved scar.
"You are not to leave my sight until this is finished," she said, then made her way to the stairway. "We will wait out the storm and make our way to the northwest tower. As long as you are useful you will not be treated as a prisoner... or worse."
He listened as her footsteps faded down the stairs, felt the gaze of Duras on him before the big warrior left him. Bastun eased himself down on his injured shoulder, pulling his cloak tight as he closed his eyes. Wrapped in cloth and pressed beneath his weight, the Breath remained cold even as he succumbed to a fitful sleep.
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The day waned to evening and Bastun awoke in the hushed silence of the guard tower. The storm's howl had lessened to a moan, and he settled in to study the worn spellbook from his pack. Lighting a small candle, he pored over pages

written in his own hand. The medium of ink and parchment had a calming effect on his mind, allowing him to focus on only those spells he felt would be necessary in the fight to come. Time became a stranger, something that only happened to other people, as he absorbed the words and gestures of magic into his memory. Though other more passive workings caught his eye, favorites useful for research and learning, he chose only one in the end and used it immediately.

Retrieving the journals taken from the library, he skimmed the entries of the Shield's Magewarden, Athumrani. The fear and paranoia that filled Athumrani was evident, and Bastun suspected there was much the Magewarden had not put to paper. From beginning to end the handwriting's change from impersonal script into hurried and emotional scratching was disturbing in a way that seemed almost claustrophobic. As the walls of safety closed in on the Magewarden, so did the room seem smaller and more threatening around Bastun. The compulsion to burst through the doors and breathe fresh air was strong and familiar. He glanced at the pommel of the Breath at his side, covering it with the hem of his robe and shivering at the memory of the compulsion it had drawn over him.

The second journal was truly a prize, surprising at first, yet the tone of Athumrani's writing made clear why the two books had been together. The first page declared it to be the notes of Arkaius himself, many of which concerned his experiences with the Word—due to the nature of the notes, it went well into explaining Athumrani's frantic state of mind.

Much of the king's research into the Ilythiiri had clearly been torn away, but what remained was a stunning account of the days after the first use of the Word. Bastun imagined the voice of Arkaius, carrying him and the Breath outside, along the wall, and up to the top of the northwest tower. In that tower lay a solid black door that had not opened during any

living memory, a door that held the secrets of Shandaular's ruin. The king was filled with regret over what he had worked to create, and he feared for his people as he knew the Nentyarch would send yet another army to claim Shandaular's portal for their empire. Like Athumrani, he too suspected an agent of Dun-Tharos had infiltrated the Shield.

Bastun sighed in frustration. More torn pages left a gaping hole in the preparations Arkaius had made in keeping the Word secret. All that remained were the king's last thoughts, making ready for the imminent attack and his intention to sacrifice himself in destroying the portal. His people would escape to the far south and the Nentyarch would be denied his prize. Common history of the realm told of these events, though Bastun wondered who it had been—in those last moments as Shandaular was razed by the Nentyarch's army—who actually used the Word.

"I see the vremyonni hunger for knowledge is as voracious as I've heard."

Bastun started but did not turn at the sound of Anilya's voice. He kept his back to her and let his hand drift protectively to the Breath.

"Some of us find in books those things that cure the urge to seek adventure," he said, wondering how she had made her way up to him without being heard or stopped by the guard at the bottom of the stairs.

"Actually, I tend to find in them just the opposite."

"Ohriman is dead," he said, in no mood to banter around what they both knew. "If you've come sniffing around for news of him I think you'll be more successful closer to ground level."

"I didn't ask," she said. "Besides, with all the ghosts in this place, I think dead is a loose term at best."

Deftly replacing the journals in his pack, he shifted himself to face her. Resting his hands on his knees, he regarded her as he might a new kind of insect.

"I tend not to think of the dead loosely," he said. "Take for

instance those Creel in the Central Tower. Interesting scars they had, do you not think? Pale, bloodless cuts and scratches—"
"The Shield itself is a ghost," she said, ignoring him, "having died long ago, its purpose unfulfilled, lost to the outside world in a shroud of mist and cold. Most scoff at the idea that any structure survives in this place at all, but those who brave the ruins, who get close enough to see, even many of them will deny that it really exists."
"And that's where it should have stayed," Bastun said, studying the durthan as she peered through arrow slits into the growing darkness outside. "Buried in mist and denial for another thousand years, useless to anyone... save for those ignorant of its history."
"You assume my ignorance?" she asked playfully, and she reached up to remove her mask. He gaped at her beauty revealed, her fair skin and dark eyes framed by short locks of night black hair. She smiled at him, a graceful curve in her full lips that barely registered as movement but which changed her entire expression. "Ignorance can be bliss, Bastun."
"Knowledge is power,'' he said, casting his gaze to the floor, avoiding the eyes and the smile that had broken his thoughts.
She leaned against the wall and slid down to sit. Her stare never left him. Her smile seemed almost to cast its own shadow over him. Avoiding sight of it did little to erase its presence. Glancing up, he watched as she rested her head on her shoulder and propped an arm over a bended knee.
"And what's the use of power," she asked, "without a little bliss now and then?"
His cautious stare became wide-eyed alarm as he watched the faint image of the wall become visible through her shoulder. Her entire image shimmered and faded away. Rising to one knee, he caught up his staff and brushed his palm against the Breath. The mental weight of the weapon's

presence was making such fearful movements reflexive.
Anilya was gone. No footprints in the dust or any disturbance of the loft indicated she had been there at all.
"Illusion," he whispered.
He heard voices downstairs and walked to the loft's edge. Thaena spoke with Duras as the group prepared to brave the wall. The ethran noticed Bastun watching and gestured for him to join them. Several of the sellswords worked to unbar the western door as he descended the stairs. Nearby, observing their progress, stood Anilya. Her mask back in place, she offered him only the slightest of glances before the door opened to reveal a wall of white.
Pausing in his descent, he placed a hand over the journals at his side. Their remembered words fluttered around his quiet fears like moths to a flame.
Pulling his cloak tight over the Breath, he shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his thoughts, and walked the rest of the way down the stairs.
In a daze he stepped through the open door behind the others. Under the now clear sky he wavered a moment, leaning on the battlements and alarmed by a sudden vertigo. Mist spread out from the walls of the Shield like an ocean of smoky white, unstirred by the storm, to hide the fortress in its folds
once again. He looked away from the unseen depths of the mist, feeling nauseous and focusing instead on the calm skies overhead. The night glittered and twinkled as he caught his breath and steadied himself. He marveled at the stars, though if he witnessed stars of the past or the present, he could not be sure.
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marched through the unbroken snow atop the west wall, the second of the three guard towers in sight. Thaena led the way with Duras close at her side. Bastun struggled to keep pace but found it increasingly difficult to maintain his focus.

He kept close watch on the durthan, wondering if she had cast some spell upon him. Maintaining the width of the wall between them, he guided his steps by the battlements. His head ached as he eyed Anilya, who seemed not to notice him at all. As his fingers brushed the pommel of the Breath he felt an uncanny assurance that the durthan had little to do with what was occurring.

The air shimmered with movement, rippling harmlessly through Thaena and Duras, past Anilya and Syrolf. The strange wave flowed along the wall, ancient images manifesting as they had before. Nar soldiers battled silently against the Shield's defenders, making Bastun a lone witness to the muted past. Quiet screams stretched tight dying faces lit with ghostly light. He flinched and drew back as phantom swords and spears were thrust through him, finding their targets elsewhere in that other time, though his skin itched at the contact.

He kept moving as if nothing were amiss, though he could not deny the sudden urge to dash ahead of the group. His headache became a piercing stab, and he gasped as a foreign compulsion warred with his will. An absent-minded touch

upon the Breath became a white-knuckled grip as he resisted the strange command to escape his captors and reach the northwest tower—the tower of the Word.

The need consumed him, ignoring all reason or caution. Stumbling forward, his legs buckled and he fell in the snow. Strange words escaped his lips, a language unspoken for centuries, but unmistakably a dialect of the Nar tongue. He muttered and spit as the others formed a circle around him.

A blade slid from its scabbard, and Anilya crossed her arms defensively.

"Get up, exile!" Syrolf said, shoving his boot into Bastun's ribs.

He tried to rise, squinting through the chaos of ghosts that surrounded him. Duras appeared and placed a hand on his

shoulder. The contact seemed to ground him briefly in the present. His muttering stopped and he rose to one knee.
"What's wrong, Bastun? Are you hurt?" Duras said, his voice strident and clear in the silence of the violent images.
"Get him to his feet!" Thaena yelled. "We cannot stop here!"
He felt himself being lifted, though by whom he wasn't sure. Spirits struggled all around them, stabbing and slashing, reliving their ancient battle. He groaned, trying to find his balance, unsure of his footing.
"He spoke like the language of the Creel!" Syrolf proclaimed, drawing closer with his sword.
The ghosts paused in their fighting, turning as one toward the center of the wall where a black aura of magic pulsed. Thaena turned as well, then Duras. Syrolf walked past them, his eyes widening as shadows coalesced out of thin air.
Pain subsiding, Bastun released his grip on the Breath, the bond it had forged between himself and the past fading, his last sight being of the child at the center of the swirling darkness on the wall.
"They can see it... her... them..." he whispered,
drawing a curious glance from Duras. "The children in the stone..."
In the thrashing shadows stood the eldest girl of the child spirits, her hair waving as before, tossed in some strange watery current. Thaena strode forward, her hands tracing the intricate motions of a spell. Duras cursed and shoved Bastun against the battlements as he rushed to stand at the ethran's side.
The wall hummed beneath his palms, vibrating with power, and he pushed himself away.
"Wait!" he cried. "Stop!"
Thaena glanced at him, fury in her eyes as the glow of magic faded from her hands. Flailing chains whipped around the girl in shadow as her head tilted, her weight slowly shifting forward.
"No," Bastun muttered in fear and stepped forward.

A familiar hand gripped his shoulder roughly, stopping him from getting any closer to the ethran. Turning, he spun his staff into the center of Syrolfs chest. The warrior stumbled backward but recovered quickly. He advanced on the vremyonni even as the shadows erupted in a chorus of pained and angry voices.

Thaena and Duras fell back from the darkness as the wall shook with a terrible impact. No one moved as the snow's surface shifted, conforming to the cracks of damage beneath. Anilya and her men were the first to begin retreating from the growing rift. Thaena followed suit as the wall began to crumble before their eyes. With a curse Syrolf fell in step behind the ethran and the fang.

Bastun froze in place, staring into the shadows as if he might communicate with them, plead with them to trust him. The remnant of some horrible memory flitted through his thoughts, a recollection not his own, but somehow imparted to him through the Breath.

Duras grabbed his arm and pulled.

"Run, Bastun! The wall won't stand much longer!"

Shrugging him off, the vremyonni held onto the battlements for balance. Snow just paces in front of him slid away and fell. Duras grabbed him again, hauling him back toward the tower.

"Come!"

Bastun hesitated only a moment before relenting. He fled the pursuing darkness. Somewhere in its midst was the little one, the innocent. Whatever influence she had over the others was gone, and he feared for her as the other ghosts succumbed to madness.

"She's not your sister," he mumbled, but he couldn't let go of the concern he had for the suffering spirit. "She's something else. Can't remember..."

Stone gave way beneath him and he slipped. He stopped as Duras's grip on his robes left him swinging over the edge. Pulled back onto solid ground, he nodded to his old friend

and the pair ran for the tower door.
The tremors had slowed, but the shadows continued to flow toward them. Ducking inside, they found the tower mostly empty save for the last few members of the fang, who were descending through a trap door. Duras led the way, and Bastun kept watch on the spirits whose howls and whispers echoed as they entered the chamber, eclipsing the entrance. Backing down the stairs, Bastun brought spells to mind, considering one after the other as he thought of a way to stop the maddened ghosts. Duras's footfalls could be heard below, joined by the shouted orders of Thaena and Anilya. Swords and axes cracked against old wood, creating an escape. Passing a small window, Bastun paused to observe the destruction of the wall.
Thaena meant to cross it, he realized. The ethran's intentions of reaching the northwest tower were as determined as the spirits' intention to stop them. Looking back to the stairs, the shadows crawled closer and grew louder in their pursuit. Thaena would never make it in time.
Steeling himself, he stopped, flexing his hand and steadying his thoughts.
"You want this?" he yelled at the shadows, pulling his cloak aside and revealing the Breath. They hissed in answer. "I give it to you! Take it!"
He gripped the handle and drew the blade from his belt, brandishing the weapon at the crowded darkness. Keening wails erupted from the mass, their chainlike tendrils drawing back into the stone. His vision once again was thrust into scenes of the past. Pain lanced through his skull. It was stronger now. The link forged by the Breath between himself and the Shield's history filled his ears with the sounds of soldiers shouting orders and boots pounding down the stairs. Ghostly warriors streamed past him like a cold wind raising gooseflesh on his arms and neck. The shadows became a blurry double image, existing in both the present and the past.

"Are they repeating the past," he whispered, "or are we?"
The Breath blurred as well, trailing behind itself as he continued down the stairs. A ghostly arm followed his own, wielding the artifacts counterpart in the haunting reenactment.
The blade itself is haunted, he thought, growing stronger the closer we get, the farther we run....
Mystified, he caught his own reflection in a sheet of ice along the wall. There, superimposed over his mask, lay the face of a stranger. An older man with a salt-and-pepper beard, wearing dark blue robes, regarded him with a look of mystified surprise.
Too shocked to examine the spirit, he turned and ran, following in the footsteps of the Shield's defenders, caught up in their battle as surely as if he were one of them. He suspected that somehow he might be one of them, the hem of his robes trailing a translucent edge as he neared a pale light below.
Tumbling into a room crowded with the images, he reached through them as if they were cobwebs. The nentyarch's soldiers appeared among them, and the battle continued. The shadowy children still approached from behind, but they would not near
the Breath. The mass of shadows fell in among the ghostly fray, dispersing and joining with the persistent vision. They devoured without prejudice, enveloping defender and attacker alike, losing themselves in the ancient siege.
The strain of witnessing past and present pressed on Bastun's mind, increasing the pain behind his eyes. He moved toward the door, squinting through the spirits' flesh toward solid reality, trying to stay focused. A Nar blade slashed toward his throat, and reflexively he pulled back, returning the strike as he thrust the Breath into the phantom soldier. He gasped as the soldier attempted to parry the blow, his sword passing through the Breath with a shimmer of faint light.

Bastun stumbled toward the doorway in shock, staring as the soldier was impaled on a pike from behind. He retreated outside. The ground became uneven beneath him, and he fell against a wall of broken stone and rubble. He replaced the Breath in his belt, sighing in relief as the scenes faded and the present reasserted itself in his mind.

"He saw me," he said in disbelief, repeating the phrase over and over as he turned to assess the climb before him. Pulling himself higher, he found Duras waiting for him several feet up.

"Take my hand," the warrior said, leaning over the edge of the ruined pile the wall had become.

Accepting the offer, Bastun reached the top and stood beside the warrior, still breathless and wide-eyed from the experience. The others made their way to the second guard tower far ahead of the pair. Thaena stood by, staring after them as they climbed over the fallen wall. The fang set their swords and axes to work again, beating at a frozen door in the base of the tower. Syrolf looked little pleased that Bastun had survived, and he sneered before shouting at the berserkers to quicken their strokes.

As Duras and Bastun reached them, the group was entering the tower. Thaena greeted them with a nod and turned away. Inside, Bastun noted the first few steps of an old staircase ascending from the dust and rubble of what remained of the tower's interior. Anilya's men set to work on a second door, presumably leading through the interior of the next stretch of the western wall.

"We'll take as few chances as possible atop the wall from here on," Anilya said as Duras approached her. "We can use the inner wall to reach the last guard tower and ascend from there to—"

"That's presuming we don't need wings there as well," Bastun said as he studied the ruined floors above them. He smiled beneath his mask. Staring back toward the last tower, across the. field of rubble now being overcome by

settling mists, he wondered at that face in the ice. Though slivers of fear and the strange chill of the past's touch remained with him, the scholar in him could not help but be fascinated by what he'd witnessed.
Thaena did not reply, turning away to watch the progress of digging the door free of the ice and stone. Bastun shook his head, cursing the timing and promising himself to record all that he remembered in his own journal when given the time. The thought gave him pause and he reflected on the expectation that he would survive the night. Though well-grounded in what could occur if what he suspected was true, he was surprised by the stubborn presence of hope in the back of his mind.
"What happened back there on the wall, Bastun? When you fell?" Duras asked, his voice bringing the vremyonni from his thoughts. "I thought I heard you say something about your sister."
There was an odd gravity in Duras's voice. It banished his fascination with the far past and brought him fully back into the present. He found he couldn't meet his old friend's gaze, and he looked instead to the floor. Sitting in his gut like a meal gone bad was the memory of Duras and Thaena's embrace. He did not yet feel any compulsion to share his thoughts, nor did
he trust the voice that would carry those thoughts. The only other to whom he might have confided was dead and buried, Master Keffrass's grave not yet even cold in his memory. "It doesn't matter now. I—"
The sound of cracking wood stopped him in mid-sentence, and he turned as the last few splinters of the door fell inward to reveal the coal black darkness of the inner wall.
The scent of stale air—and something else, familiar yet indefinable—drew him toward the doorway, even as the sellswords fell back, expressions of shock crossing their faces. Several of the fang glanced inside as well, then looked away and whispered prayers to the Three as they marked

themselves with runes of warding.
Bastun studied these reactions as he walked through the group. Thaena blinked slowly and turned her back on the door. Anilya crossed her arms, tilting her head smugly. Nearing the cleared threshold, torchlight flickered into the high open space as if unwilling to disturb the grim peace within. Unflinching, Bastun summoned his own light, holding his staff forward as he entered and descended the first few steps of a short stairway to observe the macabre scene that had so affected his companions.
Bodies. Hundreds of corpses, frozen in the armor in which they died. Some still impaled on the weapons that took their lives, others sprawled on top of one another with no apparent injury save the layers of ice that coated them. He sighed angrily, looking from one body to the next. Nar soldier and Shield defender alike shared the same lack of peace, their only grave a length of stone wall sealed by a simple door.
"They left them here," he whispered, and he looked sidelong at the others. Bereft of any kind of proper burial, he suspected each one of the dead still fought through the last hours of their life, had indeed seen them killing one another through the strange eyes of the Breath. Why had the wychlaren not buried them when they first explored the Shield?
The gaze he finally found was no longer the face of an old friend, no longer the hope of anything except an escape from his own past and the homeland where it was forged. What he saw was only the mask of a wychlaren.
Taking up his staff, lighting the way, he turned and made his way down into the makeshift graveyard. The grasping arms of the dead, illuminated by his passing, seemed to plead for release. Cautiously Duras followed, leading the others.
There was no argument that Bastun went in first, as all expected the dead to rise at any moment and put an end to their cursed journey through the Shield.

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Thaena stood in stunned silence as the fang filed past her through the door and into the wall. The berserkers wore looks of trepidation as they descended the steps and eyed the frozen bodies. Anilya stood by while her remaining ten sellswords followed behind the Ice Wolves and then entered herself with nary a word to the ethran.

Though she observed quietly, noting their passing, Thaena did not move for several moments. Their torches bobbed and swayed through the darkness, revealing ever more of the horrors her sisters had, for some reason, chosen to leave sealed away inside the wall. They had no doubt debated the subject since setting the Shield as an outpost. Rivalries among her superiors had obviously delayed any proposed action.

She walked among those long dead, glancing upon frozen faces, and felt the shame of her sisterhood laid upon her shoulders. Anger quickly followed shame, that she should endure the accusing stare of Bastun for the indiscretions of a handful of hathrans. Likely the bodies required more than simple burial or burning—or perhaps the spirits of the city were considered the greater threat. The Shield's ghosts had been pacified for several years while the streets of Shandaular

flooded with the souls of restless dead. She found reasoning enough for her sisters in the magnitude of the scene, but could not escape the accusing eyes of the vremyonni. Bastun had looked upon her with a secret in his stare, something far beyond the knowledge of unburied soldiers in the depths of an old castle wall.

With a whispered word she amplified her sight. She searched for traces of the Weave, hidden or dormant magic, spells of necromancy or dark sorcery. No specific dweomer of any sort presented itself, though a strange aura permeated everything she saw. It throbbed and glowed with a dull light that she found unnerving. The effect appeared to be a

constant throughout the Shield, like the background residue of some ancient working that refused to fade away.
Ahead of her, past the flickering torches of the fang, one light remained steady and strong. Bastun strode confidently among the bodies, pausing occasionally to study some insignia or ancient blade. Duras followed in the vremyonni's footsteps, and she regretted the silence that had grown between them. Her guardian seemed determined to trust in Bastun for reasons she felt were more self-serving than mere loyalty to old friendship. The secret Duras had kept for so long threatened to blind him, and Thaena worried that she might lose him if he did not unburden himself soon.
She slowed, allowing the nearest torch to leave her behind several strides.
"This is no time for confessions," she whispered and turned in a slow circle, searching the bodies, observing their faces and states of death. "Bastun's secret is what matters now."
"I agree."
She spun and raised her hands, a spell rising to her lips before noting the dark mask of the durthan appearing through the shadows. Lowering her hands, though keeping the spell in mind, she was astonished by the durthans stealth. Magic could keep one hidden in darkness and hide the sound of
one's footsteps, but Thaena would have seen such tricks like a beacon against the Shield's muted aura.
"And what do you intend to do?" Thaena asked.
"I presume the same as you," Anilya replied and walked past her toward the body of an older man leaning against the wall. The ice had kept the man in relatively good condition. The durthan knelt close, studying the soldier's well-made armor and the area around his throat. "To discover what happened here—what might happen again if the vremyonni truly has turned against his homeland."
Thaena approached the corpse and looked it over. Anilya had chosen well. With his fine armor, the man appeared an

officer of some sort and was among the many physically uninjured. Details of Shandaular's destruction were sketchy at best, and deeper secrets were known only to the hathrans and vremyonni. She needed to know at least some of what Bastun knew about the Shield, though she dreaded the method of gleaning that information.

"He will do," Thaena said softly and knelt beside the durthan. Looking back toward the fang she added, "Wait a moment longer. They already believe this place to be smordanya. There is no reason to feed their superstition with this."

"As you wish," Anilya said, "but it does not change the fact that they may be correct."

They sat in silence as the glow of torches drew farther away, leaving them in darkness. Thaena heard the durthan's robes rustling, and she reached out, touching Anilya's arm.

"No," she said. "I will do this."

Receiving no answer, she let her fingertips rest on the hand of the frozen soldier as she whispered the incantation that would give voice to his remains. Time disappeared as she carefully intoned the ritual which was, to the wychlaren, a sacred magic that she felt obliged to cast herself. Her eyes widened in the dark as she chanted, feeling the last words slip past her lips with a quiet shudder. The hand she touched flinched.

Drawing back, she stared into the place where the body's face would be, and she shivered as two points of light appeared in its eyes. There was no spirit or soul summoned by the casting, only a reflection of who this soldier was and what he knew. A wheezing breath scratched its way out of a long-unused throat.

"Who disturbs this one?" the voice said in a hoarse whisper.

"We do," Thaena answered, though she was taken aback by a question from a corpse that should have little sense of itself. "There are questions that demand answers."

"I pray this one's answers please you, and quickly."

Thaena felt a shiver run down her spine and was thankful for the darkness that blinded her from all'but the bright eyes that stared into nothing.
"For what reason did you come to the Shield?" she asked, deciding to begin simply.
"By order of the prince we came, through burning Shandaular and fallen portal, to capture the Shield and keep it whole."
"Of what value is the Shield without city and portal?"
"We do not know," it replied, then paused, its wheezing breath tortured and deep. "This one does not question orders. Though there are rumors..."
"Tell us," she commanded, eager to have her answers and end the spell.
"Secret eyes, a traitor to his king, lead us to a hidden place, a powerful secret—some call it the Word and the Breath. Ambition our prince has for his father's throne. A new master the prince seeks. Our priests speak of it in hushed voices, but we hear"—the scratchy breath quickened as if fearful, the bright eyes rolled in their sockets—"the kiss of Levistus."
"You fear this? What is the Word and the Breath?"
"Let it be! Let it be!" he exclaimed, "We saw... watched as children marched... sons and daughters of nobles... took the gates in screaming shadows. They burned and bore madness... forged the path for our army. We know the sorcery that awaits those who displease our prince. Let it be...."
"How did you die here?" Anilya asked, and Thaena resisted the compulsion to hush the durthan. Direct questions as to a spirit's death could disturb the spell, draw forth nonsensical answers or pained ravings, but she too wished to hear his answer.
"Only white... waves of cold and tearing magic... unhallowed beasts and heavy night. Dead, we lay in the quiet... listening as the hound came... feasting upon one then the other... howling and baying. No peace. Trapped until sundown...

rooted in stone by cursed magic. We still fight for our prince... over and over...."
"Serevan Crell? He is your prince?" she asked, but the voice kept on, lost in its own unending death.
"Shadows of the children... still playing in the walls...."
Bastun's spirits, she thought, and looked around as if she felt the shadows even now crawling near to twist her emotions into fury again.
"They torment us... boil our cold blood in battle... until our prince returns... to find his Breath."
"He is raving," Anilya whispered. "There's nothing here for us."
Thaena ignored the durthan, piecing together the fragmented narrative with what Bastun had already told her about Serevan Crell. The vremyonni's knowledge of the Shield seemed accurate, which made his omission of the Breath and the Word more suspect than she was content to leave be. The spirit's voice continued to mutter and ramble as she determined what should be done.
"End it!" said Anilya. "He cannot—"
The sound of cracking ice in the distance cut off the durthan.
Thaena's eyes widened, looking ahead, searching the dark for some disturbance. She was rewarded by the sound of a faint whimper, like a pained dog. Unseen claws scratched at stone in that black distance between she and her fang. Standing, she made to end her spell when the body's voice stopped her cold.
"Ghosts of wild warriors and strange peoples... witches in masks... asking questions... now you." The bright eyes faded away after its cryptic rant was finished. She struggled to recall a spell of light even as a low, thundering growl echoed through the tall corridor of the Shield's wall.

chapter eighteen

The fang set to work freeing the doors at the end of the hall, pulling stiff bodies away from one another. More torches

were lit and laid by the side to loosen the ice.
Looking high into the shadows overhead, Bastun imagined the battles fought above and below the wall, resisting the urge to caress the cold metal of the Breath and bear witness to the ghosts still fighting.
Still fighting, he thought, because of I’ll-conceived magic in the past and wychlaren neglect in the present.
The length of wall they toiled beneath was once known as the Bridge of Wakes, where the wizard rulers of Shandaular were carried upon their passing to the northwest tower. All but the last were cremated at the tower's top, Arkaius's remains being utterly destroyed in his sacrificial attempt to seal the portal in the heart of the city. Troubled by the thought, he recalled there were no solid records regarding the fate of Athumrani.
"See something?" Duras asked and followed Bastun's gaze up into the darkness.
"No, just remembering my studies," he replied, and returned to watching the progress at the doors. Duras looked away as well, turning back to stare into the dark behind them with a concerned expression. "We're close now. The tower beyond should be well enough intact if memory serves, and the northwest tower has been—"
"Thaena still hasn't caught up," Duras said, then added, "and the durthan is with her."
Bastun sympathized with his friend's worry, but he could find little fear for the ethran.
"You love her," he said solemnly, the words slipping out.
"I am—" Duras began, then paused, sighing in the awkward silence that followed before continuing, "I am her guardian."
The answer stung, it tore at Bastun's insides like nothing else had, but it was what he'd needed to hear. The weight of lost time on his shoulders lessened, though it settled in more comfortably—more permanently. Neither of the pair spoke, listening to the cadence of axes and swords on ice and wood. It was as if something had broken, a divergence

between what was and what should have been.
"Perhaps I should go back for her," Duras said at length, hand resting on the hilt of his long sword.
"She'll be fine. Thaena can—" Bastun stopped, noticing the quick glances of several among the fang. They looked at him and at Duras, then to Syrolf, who shook his head derisively at the pair. The wedge that was being driven between Duras and his warriors was becoming painfully apparent. Their leader's loyalty to an old friend threatened to make a bad situation worse, and Bastun rethought his words. "I think you should do as she does, Duras. Do as you damn well please, ignore common sense, and leave me out of it."
The coldness in his voice was heard by all, being more for the fang's benefit than that of Duras. He kept his eyes on the floor, feeling the change in the air as Duras regarded him with sudden shock and anger. Syrolf squared his shoulders and glowered at the vremyonni.
"Watch your tongue, exile," he said. He looked as if he were about to say something else when Bastun whipped around, ignoring him as a deep and ominous sound echoed through the hall. The mask carried the noise to his ears alone at first, but
soon that sorcery was no longer needed. Something big voiced its displeasure in a disjointed growl that seemed constructed of several dozen beastly throats singing as one.
"Syrolf! With me!" Duras's sword leaped into his hand as he swiftly took command. He pointed at the berserkers. "Keep at that door! Do not stop until we return!"
Syrolf clapped two of the fang on the shoulders, and they fell in behind him. Two of the sellswords also followed as Bastun stood and followed Duras's long-legged run through the maze of bodies. The Rashemi and the sellswords alike stared after them a moment, then redoubled their efforts at freeing the doors.
They jumped over bodies and climbed over icy hills of the fallen army. Visages frozen in horror passed beneath

Bastun's boots as he summoned his axe blade, imagining a myriad of unholy beasts rising amid the piles. A massive silhouette shifted just beyond the next pile of bodies and burst into view, a charging blur of pale flesh and bones.

Duras cursed and dodged as the thing hurtled past. Syrolf was thrown aside like a rag doll, and Bastun fell as the shape turned and snarled. Raising his axe, he began chanting, repulsed as the beast entered the light. The wolflike head flinched at the illumination at first, then fixed on it.

The head was as long as a man was tall and more than half as wide. Odd knots and malformed protrusions revealed a patchwork construction of various bodies and parts. Arms and elbows formed the angry brow. Fingers gripped bone along a jaw made of broken ribcages, the ribs sharpened into vicious fangs. Legs, torsos, and faces rippled and writhed through the neck, flanks, and limbs of the creature which had no body of its own save those that made up its macabre anatomy. Ice clung to its white, hairless flesh as it bared a maw of jagged yellow fangs and prowled toward him.

A red flash of energy left Bastun's palm and sizzled across the thing's snout. Flames sprouted and guttered, steaming as ice melted and rotten flesh burned. As it shook away the offending fire, Bastun scrambled back to his feet, eyes scanning the area for any sign of the durthan or Thaena.

As he summoned another spell, berserker blades hacked at the hound's frost-rimed flanks, but to no apparent effect. It swiped and clawed, batting them away and snapping at those that got too close. Growls emanated from a collection of mouths along the beast's neck, humanoid faces twisted in torment as the hound scattered its attackers, separating them from one another. Arcs of lightning leapt from Bastun's fingertips, sizzling among the conjoined corpses and causing each to spasm and steam. The whole of the monster shuddered, and it wobbled on its legs, but only for a moment as it pinned a screaming sellsword beneath a heavy paw.

The other sellsword, a vicious dark-skinned easterner wielding twin axes, hacked at the beast's snout, and it reared back. Bastun circled, chanting softly and still searching for sign of Anilya or Thaena. A female voice rang out from behind and he turned, energy crackling at his fingertips as Thaena appeared atop a pile of corpses and ice. He ceased his spell as a brilliant white light shot from her staff and pierced the hound with a blazing heat.

It howled in pain from a score of hideous throats, trembling as the searing hole in its side grew and blackened to ash. The myriad of its tortured faces moaned in unison as they twisted to get a view of the ethran. Legs slipping on the icy stone, it thrashed, an aimless paw crushing the fallen sellsword as it snapped at the easterner. The man was taken screaming into the air. Razor-sharp rib-fangs pierced through armor and furs, gnashing in an awkward imitation of feeding.

Horrified by the spectacle, Bastun stopped as the screams ceased and the body slid down the throat. Bits of armor, chewed and slashed, fell from in between clasped arms and broken legs. Fur cloak and boots sloughed away as well, discarded as the

new body took its place in the mass. In moments the gaping wound in its side had shrunk. The wolflike head rose, focused on Thaena.

Duras rushed forward, placing himself in the hound's path. Bastun stepped back a pace, magic sliding down his arms as the beast crouched to pounce. Then his world dissolved into white wind and ice.

He could hear the clash of steel on bone, the thunderous crash of the creature landing atop ancient bodies, and the chanting voice of Thaena. He fell to his side, thrown across the floor, tumbling against the dead. Chill caressed his skin for the briefest of moments before heat began surging through him. The fever burned like fire in his blood. Snow and ice melted, his long braids were matted to his head and

draped across his mask, steaming as he pushed himself up. Heat churned in his gut like a pit of coals, and he cried out, turning with murderous intent to find Anilya.
Eyes wide behind her mask, the durthan stared, a slender, pale wand still glowing in her hand.
Bastun raised his axe and started toward her, turning the curse on his lips into eager words of magic. The sounds of battle echoed behind him, and he only just heard the sound of approaching footfalls crashing ever closer. Reluctantly turning, he swung as the hound bore down on him. The force of the blow cracked against the beast's lower jaw, sending Bastun falling to the right.
He rolled out of the way as more bolts of burning light charred the hound's back, distracting the descending jaws. Pulling himself up a drift of bodies, Bastun found the durthan gone, catching a fleeting glimpse of her figure as she ran for the western exit. Wavering, he looked between the escaping Anilya and the battle below.
Cursing, he noted with alarm the long-dead body captured in the beast's fangs. Throwing its head back it devoured the corpse, healing more of its wounds even as they were made. The
battleground all around became more than just an unworthy graveyard—a feast of hundreds filled the inner wall.
"Now, damn all the luck, is my chance," he whispered, taking heart in Thaena's continued casting, Duras's war song, and the cries of pain as the beast was injured. He made after the durthan, eager to return the favor of her betrayal.
Several Rashemi surrounded the open door. Neither Anilya nor her sellswords were anywhere to be seen. The Ice Wolves seemed eager for battle and the sight of him would do little to calm this instinct. He had no time to stop and explain himself. He whispered a quick spell just before entering the light of their torches. His form shifted and rippled, becoming translucent and shadowlike. Staying on the move, he barely

made a sound as he slid by them, little more than a disturbance on the air.
The stairwell to the top of the tower was intact, and he swiftly followed the footsteps he could hear above. Not quite shadow and not quite solid, he was able to see the thick darkness gathering in pools below him. Quiet sobs and whispered insanities rose as shadowy tendrils grasped at the bottom step. Ignoring the child spirits, he gained on the durthan and climbed the last few steps just behind her sellsword guards, who could not see or hear him.
Eyeing the walls and heavy doors, Anilya strode into the room ahead of him. Shouts and curses echoed from the bottom of the tower. Her men turned to look over the railing just as she spun around, seeming to notice his odd shimmer in the air. The haft of his axe slammed into her raised arm as she attempted to defend herself. His blade whistled past her mask and she fell backward, landing on her hands. As he raised the axe to swing again, the durthan pointed a ringed finger and hissed an arcane syllable. The blade disappeared from the staff and would move no closer to her no matter how he strained to bring it to bear.
He spun away, dodging the hurled dagger of an attentive sellsword.
"You want the Breath?" he said through gritted teeth. "Then by all means—"
He reached for the sword, his hand wrapping around the hilt, fully intending to end Anilya's twisted quest in a flash of steel. Contact with the blade stopped him cold, a sensation of wracking despair crushing his anger in a vice of hopelessness. He fell to one knee as the foreign mind haunting the blade flooded his being.
Anilya gestured swiftly, halting the blades of her men.
Bastun struggled to assert himself, fearful of becoming lost again amidst misty spirits of the past. The durthan stood, studying him as he tried to rise. His eye caught the broken form of an old mirror leaning against the wall, and he looked

in wonder upon the same stranger he'd witnessed before.
The bearded older man in blue robes knelt much as he did. The man tightly clutched a wavy-bladed long sword that could be none other than the Breath, which Bastun fought to release from his own hand. On the spirit's sleeve, he saw the shape of a shield surrounding a stylized archway, and he gaped in shock.
"You are a fool, Bastun," the durthan spoke in a hushed tone. "The door that blade opens could defend Rashemen better than a thousand wychlaren outposts!"
Who are you? The spirit reflection mouthed the words, and Bastun felt sorrow give way to more manageable emotions. He let go of the Breath, his hand numb, and the stranger's image faded. The implications of all he had witnessed were beginning to solidify toward a conclusion that he could not deny. In a daze, he faced Anilya.
"You care nothing for Rashemen, Anilya," he said, staggered somewhat by the vision. "Your passion lacks sincerity."
"So says the exile," she replied, then added more softly as she drew closer to him. "Why didn't you run? You could have taken the Breath and disappeared, but you didn't."
"I wouldn't abandon my friends," he said. "Thaena needs—"
"She doesn't love you," Anilya said, "and Duras doesn't understand you any more than Syrolf or the others."
"And you understand me?" He caught his breath and drew his robe over the wavy blade, backing away cautiously. Distantly, he noticed the sounds of battle far below them were fading.
"More than them," she answered. "What if you died here? The Breath unburied, left with your corpse to be easily found. You know—though you may not say so out loud—you know this power could be used for Rashemen."
"No." He blinked, the rhythm of her voice strange and compelling. "This isn't a power that can be commanded."
"Not yet." She came nearer. "There are no assurances save that the Word, with proper study and understanding, will be

needed. Even now, Thay, our worst enemy, grows more aggressive, desires our land's power and our people as slaves."
"Are the durthan any different?"
"My sisters seek power for the sake of Rashemen, not conquest." She stared deep into his eyes, and he found it difficult to pull away, weakened by her voice, though inwardly he found a minute spark of agreement. "Imagine the fall of Thay and cowing the raiders of Narfell.
"And wars with Aglarond?" he asked. "Attacking the druids of the Great Dale, perhaps? Where does it end?"
Shouts sounded from below, and voices echoed from within the tower. He wondered if the children were there, lying in wait for his countrymen, to send them up the stairs in bloodlust to find him.
"When Rashemen is safe," she said sternly, her voice growing softer as she approached. "When our people are no longer slaves. We don't have to be alone in this, you and I."
He drew back. Though she had already tried to kill him once, he feared his attraction to her—and seemingly hers to him—more than her magic. The kindred spirit he had sensed in her since arriving at the Shield was strong and called to him. This frightened him beyond measure, for if he could find common ground with such a woman, what might that say about himself?
"No," he said, searching her eyes for some hint of reasoning that might hear him beyond her quest for the Word's power. "None of us are alone in this place. You were right before, about the Shield being a ghost. Its walls and towers are just bones left to dry, but the spirit remains, just like those lost in the city streets."
"You think the Shield is alive?" she said, drawing nearer still. He tensed but did not move away.
The booted charge of the Rashemi grew closer as they climbed the stairs, and he knew he would lose this chance at stopping Anilya.

"Its past is alive. The day Shandaular was destroyed lives on," he spoke slowly, still working things out, giving voice to his concerns. He was dimly aware that whatever charm she'd been casting was gone, and he feared the fact that it was no longer necessary. Her fingertips brushed his shoulders, and he met her gaze cautiously, grateful for the masks that prevented desire from overcoming sense. "And as we become more aware of that past..."
"Bastun," she said quietly.
"... it becomes more aware of us," he said, determined to finish the thought that had plagued him. "We're becoming a part of that day."
"I cannot concern myself with the past," she said, sounding almost regretful.
"I believe we'll destroy one another," he added, still hoping to reach her, but more than aware of the staff at his side and the blade he might summon.
A silence fell between them. The moment trembled on an edge between intimacy and enmity. The Rashemi were at the last landing outside the room, nearing the door. He sensed the first mote of imperfection mar the space between he and
the durthan. She blinked, slowly, the motion drawn out as he awaited some reaction to the fate that he suspected might await them.
"So be it," she said, the words hammered into his chest even as he reluctantly raised the old staff. Anilya shoved herself away from him, falling to the floor on her hands. The axe blade screamed into being, flashing brightly. The door burst open and he paused.
The Ice Wolves charged inside, shoving the sellswords out of their path. Thaena strode in with forearms crossed and Duras close behind. Syrolf limped in with blade drawn, as they all stared at the scene before them.
Anilya lay on the floor with an arm upraised against Bastun's axe. He fell back a step, shaking his head in anger at himself

for failing to anticipate her ruse. Thaena's eyes flashed, and a cruel scowl grew on Syrolf s face. The vremyonni's mind raced to come up with some explanation as he backed away from the durthan.

A faint sound drew his attention to the northwest doors. A slow cadence, like the heartbeat of a sleeping bear, stirred a primal sense of bloodlust in his veins. Not a word was spoken as the steady rhythm of beating drums shook the air.

Lament the day that Narfell won, and woe to those were there,
When black wings rose among the char of fallen
Shandaular; When Seven sang a mournful dirge within the
hollow Shield, Where restless dead lie still, waiting, to rise and
serve again.
The Nentyarch's son, by sword and curse, to tower
tall he strides, At morning light, for Breath and Word, still there
his fury came; Though cold he found among the fire, he mourned
forgotten Flame. Within the walls, inside the halls; to speak the Word
that no one heard, Of the Shield and break its silence. Of the Shield and break its silence.

—excerpt from the Firedawn Cycle, canto XII

chapter Nineteen

'Jhe walls and floors vibrated with the sound of Creel war drums.

Thaena strode into the room as Bastun and Anilya separated before her. The durthan pulled herself to her feet defensively, her eyes never leaving the vremyonni. Bastun lowered his axe.

The ethran stood between them, looking from one to the other as the Ice Wolves filed into the room, the drums affecting them much as they had Bastun—hands on weapons, eyes narrowing, and breathing becoming short

and controlled. He imagined the Creel would be in for a shock if they expected their drums to inspire fear.
Thaena's gaze rested upon Bastun as she called out orders to the fang.
"Syrolf, get those doors secured," she said.
The runescarred warrior led several men to inspect the heavy iron doors, which appeared to have opened sometime in the recent past despite the ice and rust which should have sealed them tight. Duras approached, followed by more of the fang, and Bastun backed away from them, a familiar ache growing in his head.
Thaena gestured and continued, "Restrain the vremyonni and stick close to the durthan until we know what we're dealing with."
Bastun's hand was nowhere near the Breath, yet spirits appeared behind the nearing Rashemi. Only faint outlines and bright eyes, they looked down upon him like judges as they walked through and around his countrymen. The pain increased, and a cold sweat broke out on his brow. The Breath pulsed like a living thing at his side, growing heavier. He fell to one knee, staring at the floor as the dust appeared to shift and move beneath his feet. Tiny at first, shadows bled through the stone and welled around his boots.
The sorrowful thoughts of the invading mind pushed against his will. Voices whispered throughout the chamber, and Duras stopped, the fang turning their eyes to the ceiling and floors as a thin umbral veil darkened the tower. Curses echoed between the sound of the drums and whispers. Bastun's staff clattered to the floor, rolling away as he clutched the sides of his head, fighting the urge to escape, to wield the Breath and face the enemies separating him from the Word.
Rough hands gripped his shoulders and slammed him against the wall. The sound of the drums shook the stone, and he could not separate the cadence from his own heartbeat. The foreign mind, that face in the mirror, leaked

its sorrow, anger, and indignation into his thoughts.
"Why?" he whispered through clenched teeth, not sure if the question was his own. The distant banging of swords on shields reverberated in his mind, joining the drums as the past again imitated the present. He spoke to that spirit in the blade. "Why did you do this?"
"What are you doing, Bastun?" Thaena asked as she stared at the creeping shadows and watched as her men slowly devolved into a barely held rage. Rounding on him she grabbed his robes and pulled him close. Dreamlike, he imagined he could see the children's dark madness swimming in her eyes as she shouted at him, "What have you done?"
He heard her voice, but the answer that came streaming forth was not his own. The words he spoke had no meaning to
him, the language strange and familiar all at once. He babbled forth anger and tears, a wellspring of loss that he could not control. The children wept with him, the whispers broken by quiet choking sobs. Trapped within memories that did not belong to him, he struggled to decipher bits of the language that escaped him.
"Something's wrong with him, Thaena!" Duras yelled over the cacophony of noise. "He is not doing this!"
She released Bastun's robes, her hands shaking as she reached for a small dagger at her belt, her eyes darting toward Duras. Thin tendrils of shadow laced her wrists as she wrapped her fingers around the dagger's handle.
Bastun's words came slower, slurred and broken as he fought to regain dominance over the possession. He did not fully comprehend the language he had spoken or the emotion it evoked, but the Breath, closer and closer to the Word, was becoming stronger, its former wielder more dominant. He sensed names and betrayal among the thoughts that raced through him, and he feared he might not be able to resist another invasion.

Cold hands pressed against his back, tiny fingers reaching through the wall. Though his mind was once again alone in his head, the children flooded his emotions with their own, and he felt an echo of their madness welling within him. Behind the ethran, men who were locked in their own struggle against the spirits' influence bashed fists into the floor and walls. Punches were thrown. Warriors fell and cried out. No weapons were drawn as yet, but there didn't seem to be a need.

Bastun stared as Thaena drew her small blade. He struggled against the Rashemi guards holding him. Her eyes rested upon Duras, dagger flashing in her hand, swaying in the thrall of an anger that was not her own.

"I loved you," Bastun said through clenched teeth, catching her gaze, then added, "Once. I believed every day that it was true."

She didn't truly hear him, he knew, and he felt the sickening courage of that fact, but kept on, keeping her attention, keeping her from raising the dagger against Duras.

"I imagined you were as alone as I was, told myself that we might find each other again," he continued, every muscle in his body strained. The Rashemi guards dug bruises into his arms, their breaths ragged, eyes bloodshot. The children wept and screamed in his ears, their hands scraping down his spine. "I trusted in dreams, and I lied my way through being without you."

"You lied?" she asked, blinking and trying to focus on him. Trembling, blade in hand, she glanced over her shoulder at Duras.

"I lied... and I'm still lying," he spoke over drums and howling shadows, searching for some spark of recognition. "Because you can't really hear what I'm saying, and that's the only reason I'm saying it at all—because deep down I love the lie more than you."

"What? I—" Thaena shook her head and stepped back.

Pain spread across his face and the room blurred. Suddenly

falling, he slipped from the grip of the Rashemi guards. The floor rushed toward him, and he caught himself on his hands, his mask spinning on the ground. Warmth flowed along his cheek and jaw as the chamber came back into focus. Turning, he saw Syrolf standing over him.

He shielded his face instinctively, warding off not only another blow from the wild-eyed warrior, but his appearance from the others. Duras tackled Syrolf against the wall and held him as Bastun reached for the mask. In a daze he turned it over in his hands. Steel clanged against stone, and Thaena backed away from her dropped dagger. She looked at him and paused, as if seeing him for the first time. The moment passed quickly as she turned to the fang, helping to pull those fighting apart and organize the others.

Considering the mask for a moment, he dismissed the urge to put it back on. Lowering his arm, he faced Syrolf

and stood. Retrieving his staff, he felt a wetness dripping down his neck and touched it gingerly. Blood stained his fingertips and trickled down his cheek where the warrior had struck him.

Ignoring the runescarred warrior's struggles against Duras, Bastun turned his attention instead to the shadowy spirits of the children. Spells turned through his mind as he sought another way to banish the children without wielding the Breath again. They feared the sword, but his fear of it had grown as well, afraid of becoming trapped in a past that sought to consume him.

The drums grew louder with each passing moment, thundering in his ears, though the cries and groans of the children lessened. Their shadows faltered, drawing away from the walls and floors, as if driven away by something else. SyrolPs spitting and cursing ceased, and a look of confusion crossed his face. The pounding drums reached a deep climax and then stopped.

The shadows disappeared, retreating through the east wall as a profound silence filled the void left by the Creel's

instruments. Duras released Syrolf as all attention returned to the doors and whatever lay outside. A chilling presence passed through the chamber and clung to all it touched.

Anilya stepped out of the shadows where she had waited out the possessions. With a word she melted the ice encrusting a small window near the doors and stared out upon the west wall. Thaena stepped toward the durthan and then stopped, glancing back at Bastun. Her eyes darted between Syrolf and Duras as if choosing.

"Syrolf, come with me," she said, and the warrior reluctantly complied. Though he was no longer manipulated by ghosts, they truly had only exacerbated what he already carried within him. Bastun understood the sentiment and regretted not a word he had said either. Thaena nodded at Bastun and added, "Watch him closely, Duras."

The vremyonni shook his head as the big warrior watched after the pair a moment before turning away. Bastun sat against the wall and rested the staff across his legs. Despite everything that had happened, he felt a bit more the exile that he sought to be, closer to freedom of one sort or another. Duras kneeled close by, staring at his bare face in silence for several breaths.

"Bastun," he said, his voice low and hesitant, "I don't know what's out there or what might happen before morning. But we were friends once, and I feel bound by honor to respect that friendship."

He paused, clearing his throat and coughing as if the words were stuck. Bastun's eyes narrowed as he waited. He wasn't sure if he wanted to hear what Duras had to say. Growing weary of the past and secrets, one more reminder of why he had chosen to leave Rashemen might have proved one too many.

"There's something you need to know, something I have to say—"

Bastun held up a hand, cutting him off. "Keep it, Duras," he said, staring at the floor. "I don't need to know and you don't

have to say it."
"No, I must—""
"I'm finished with Rashemen, with the vremyonni, and with the past," he said, coming to tenuous terms with the decision. "I may not have made any peace with it, but I'm leaving it. You should, too."
The big warrior's shoulders slumped. He sighed and stood again, clearly frustrated, but respecting his friend's wishes.
Left in relative peace for a moment while Thaena, Syrolf, and Anilya assessed what lay outside in wait for them, Bastun closed his eyes. The images remained, though the words were garbled and slurred, the language making no more sense to him than before. It was the names that he contemplated—and the history of Shandaular's fall as learned by vremyonni scholars.
The history claimed that the Nentyarch of Dun-Tharos,
eager to complete his empire and expand to the far south, laid siege several times to Shandaular. The final time he sent Serevan Crell, his youngest son, and the attack succeeded in breaching the city walls and the defenses of the Shield. Most of the citizens escaped through the city's portal before it was shattered.
It had been surmised that Athumrani, Magewarden of the Shield, had accompanied the people through the portal in the king's stead. Bastun rested his hand on the Magewarden's journal and recalled the fear Athumrani had written about. Shandaular's people had found themselves in the savage land of the Shaar, far to the south, and called themselves Arkaiuns in honor of their king's sacrifice.
All of this Bastun had little reason to doubt save for one detail—Athumrani never left the Shield.
The Breath lay at his side, heavy against his leg. The mind that had taken him over and responded to Thaena's questioning had identified itself as Athumrani. He had taken the Breath from hiding and fought his way through friend and foe alike to reach the Word. He had betrayed his king's

secret and left Shandaular an ice-encrusted wasteland of rubble and broken shadows. For what reason he had taken such action, Bastun could not discern. Bile rose in his throat as he imagined what could occur if he were forced to wield the weapon again, if Athumrani's presence overcame him completely.

He picked up his mask and returned it to his face, fearing that his thoughts were too visible, too transparent without the familiar protection. It was a crutch he was content to live with a while longer as he prepared himself to face the demons which had driven Athumrani to suicide—and the devils that laid in wait beyond the stones of the Shield.

Punctuating his thoughts, the Creel drums began again, echoing through the night air.

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Just outside the northwest tower torches flickered in the wind, their light a stark contrast to the darkness within the open doors. Thaena watched and listened for long moments, growing anxious for the Creel or their master to reveal themselves. The drums played the rhythm of her growing expectation, but no one appeared to satisfy it.

Tearing herself away from the window, she placed a hand on SyrolPs shoulder, moving him from between her and Anilya. The durthan stood motionless, her sellswords separated from her by the fang, as she awaited Thaena's attention. The ethran was of two minds concerning Anilya and Bastun and had no easy answers that she would readily employ against them. The matter was trivial but crucial, as the impending threat of time worked against them all.

The durthan had said nothing yet of Bastun's alleged attack upon her. With arms crossed and narrowed eyes, Thaena approached Anilya, studying her as she broke their silence.

"He tried to kill you?" she asked, keeping her tone firm but neutral.

"He tried, yes," Anilya answered.

"And do you know why?"

"No, I do not, though I stopped questioning the murderous intentions of Rashemi upon joining the durthan," she said. "Such age-old enemies rarely need reasons to spill each others blood."
"One might do well to remember that," Syrolf grumbled over his shoulder. Thaena took a breath to admonish the warrior, but exhaled calmly instead and let the statement stand. The durthan needed some reminding that their truce was temporary and that she stood on ground claimed by the wychlaren.
"Then you accuse the vremyonni of nothing?" Thaena asked.
"Only of the attempt on my life, he—"
"Threatening the life of a durthan is a trifling thing for a Rashemi to be guilty of, Anilya," she said, interrupting the durthan. "As you said yourself, age-old enemies, correct?"
"And what of his secrets? The words of the spirit beneath the wall?" Anilya asked quickly—a little too quickly to Thaena's mind. "Do you suspect him of nothing, despite his knowledge of this place?"
"What I suspect or believe has no bearing on this discussion," Thaena said, "and I am disinclined at the moment to share counsel with a durthan."
"You doubt me, despite all," Anilya said, crossing her arms and staring out the window. Tired of the durthan's flippancy, Thaena squared her shoulders and stepped toward her. Anilya could not help but meet the ethran's burning gaze, so near were their masks.
"As much as I might doubt him," she said and held the stare for a moment before continuing, "you will now join your men and await your orders. If you are displeased with my leadership, then I will fulfill your expectations of the Rashemi and our savagery. Am I clear?"
"Quite," Anilya said. She turned toward her sellswords with a leisurely step, far more calm than Thaena would have liked.
"That ought to take some fire out of you," she heard Syrolf whisper at the durthan's back.

Looking once more out the window, she studied what she could see of the tall northwest tower. Recalling the feel of the dagger in her hand made her fingers numb and brought a knot to her throat. Glancing at Duras, who stood watch over the vremyonni, she knew she would have killed him if the spirits had swayed her any farther. Stronger than Rashemi firewine those shadows were—and well more traitorous where her emotions were concerned.

For the briefest of moments as she looked upon her guardian, her lover, she regretted being of the wychlaren. The necessities of leadership were tearing them apart, testing them as never before. However, she knew her duty and felt she had

been too soft in its application. Between Duras and Syrolf, she decided that Duras might not accept the decisions she would have to make. The thought flashed through her mind that perhaps his secret was all the sin he suspected it to be. For years she'd barely been able to convince him otherwise. The child he had been still lived on in the man he'd become, ever since the day Bastun had been taken away to the Running Rocks.

Shaking her head and focusing on the situation, she took a cleansing breath and approached SyrolPs shoulder.

"You have watched out for my interests well, Syrolf," she whispered to him. "Now you must watch them more carefully. If either of our charges does anything more to make you suspect they are working against us, then..." She let the unspoken order hang on the air for a moment, noting his solemn nod of acknowledgement, then added, "Make it quick."

The drums outside halted and again left them all in silence.

From across the room she caught Bastun's eye, his mask staring at her as if hearing her words. She hoped that somehow he had.

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The doors were stiff with ice, but they creaked open much

easier than they should have. There were scars in the stone already where the Creel had recently forced them open. Winter wind breezed into the chamber and engulfed the minor warmth that torches had supplied. The Ice Wolves gathered near the opening, eager to see their enemy on the wall. Thaena watched stoically and Duras stood by ready to lead the charge.

Bastun peered over shoulders and betwixt the warriors in front of him, trying to catch a glimpse of the northwest tower. He was surrounded in the rear of the fang, along with Anilya and her sellswords. SyrolPs ever-present scowl watched their every move, Thaena's order likely on the forefront of his mind.

Bastun mused that the warrior would rather slay a vremyonni in exile over the Creel. Killing Anilya as well would only be a benefit.

He chided himself as the group began moving forward, knowing he might have been miles away from the Shield by now if he'd had any sense. Here he faced unceremonious execution, a duplicitous and beguiling durthan whose skills they still needed, and an unknown number of ignorant barbarians following what could prove to be just a recurring nightmare of the Shield itself. That nightmare, the prince of old Narfell, concerned him the most as he stepped out of the tower and viewed the length of wall ahead of them. Advancing into the unknown with swords drawn was practically a Rashemi tradition, but though they marched forward he feared they moved backward in time with each step.

"This borders on suicide," Anilya whispered at his side.

"Really? I thought this is what you wanted," he said.

"I prefer subtlety and surprise, this Rashemi courage is sickening and foolhardy," she said, looking in all directions for some sign of an ambush or trap.

He had to agree, though he did not say so out loud.

"Do you suppose he is really in there?" she asked, a playful

tone in her voice. "Prince Serevan of Dun-Tharos, withered and half-rotten, to reclaim his lost prize?"
"We both know he is," he answered, glancing sidelong at her, "though whether ghost or corpse I could not say."
"Then how do you rate our chances?" Anilya's eyes fairly smiled through her mask.
For a moment he was at a loss for words, having this conversation with a woman who had tried to kill him, seduce him, and frame him all in the space of less than a day. She acted as if this were merely normal course and seemed not the least bit bothered. He realized she was, on some level, having fun.
"I already told you I believe we'll kill each other in the end," he said, his gaze drifting to the north of the wall, the mist parting
occasionally to afford him a view of the ruined city and the first of several concentric circles of ancient ice. "Besides, Serevan has fought this battle before... in one form or another."
The group ahead stopped, and Bastun heard the crunch of boots on snow from the doors of the tower. The figures that appeared, stepping into the light of torches set to either side of the door, were unmistakably Creel, but their condition was wholly unexpected.
They were alive, a fierce stare of battle in their eyes, but their bodies seemed too pale, their gaits weaker than their muscles might imply. Dark circles hung beneath their eyes, and a slight rime of frost coated the edges of their armor and weapons.
"What trickery—?" he heard Thaena whisper from up ahead, but he had already begun to surmise what had happened. The pale skin and frost had similarly graced those of the Ice Wolves during the battle as the bleakborn fed on their life's warmth. These Creel seemed to have been fed upon as well, but not slain, being overly long in the presence of such a creature. Without a steady supply of warmth, a bleakborn

would lay dormant until approached by the living.
The Cold Prince, Bastun thought, recalling the words of the children in the library.
"Well," Anilya said, "apparently not a ghost."
"They followed him to the only place he would have any use for them," he whispered. "Serevan did not drag an army in his wake. He brought a feast."

chapter Twenty

Ihe strident blast of a horn sounded from between the pale blue lips of a Creel.
The Rashemi needed no order from Thaena to charge and meet their enemy at the wall's center. Their boots churned snow and negotiated ice expertly. Weapons sang from their sheaths and were echoed by the singing of ancient battle hymns. The Creel, despite appearances, were quick to advance, driven by their own cries and songs of steel. The first of them met in the center and the battle was joined, blood gracing snow and stone.
Though all of the fang pushed into the fray, more Nar still came from the darkness within the northwest tower. Each of them bore the same drained appearance and fierce light of fanaticism in their eyes. Bastun summoned his axe and advanced in the rear, unconcerned about the Creel's advantage in numbers. The wall limited the effectiveness of such a force, and the Rashemi battle rage was far more legendary than any among the tribes ofNarfell.
Thaena held back with Bastun and Anilya. She kept Syrolf close, though he shook with bloodlust, awaiting his turn in battle. They edged forward slowly, spells and sword at the ready for any Nar unlucky enough to break through the Rashemi press.
With each step closer to the tower, Bastun felt the tugging at his gut and tried to ignore it, focusing on the mass of swinging swords and shouting warriors—images mirrored by those Athumrani's spirit sought to force into his mind. The battle spread, the two forces twisting around one another

like oil and water. The first of the Creel laid eyes upon them and snarled, his fury such that he was beyond words or oaths. Though several of his kinsmen lay dead already, he charged and Syrolf rushed forward to meet him.

Others broke through as the fight shifted, berserkers close on their heels to protect the ethran. Thaena and Anilya summoned flames and ghostly blades, cutting down those that came too near.

Bastun met another with his axe, locking blades and witnessing firsthand the madness in the Nar's eyes. He kicked the man away, swinging wide with his axe and muttering arcane words. With a gesture he set the Creel's weapon aflame, the metal heating to a deep red. Burning quickly through the leather glove, the man dropped the sword with a cry. Leaving it to hiss in the snow, he charged Bastun.

Reversing his swing, he scored a deep wound in the Creel's shoulder but could not slow the man. The Creel ignored the injury, reaching for Bastun's throat. Thrown off-balance, axe knocked from his hands, he struggled against the madman's strength. The battle rage stirred within him, and he suppressed the urge to give it voice. He had no wish to lose control, not so close to the tower of the Word with Magewarden Athumrani's will all too ready to supplant his own.

Pushed back against the battlements, blood streamed down the Creel's arm, making it slick and hard to keep from his neck. Bastun punched and kicked viciously, though any effect it had on the man was fleeting and unnoticeable. Rough hands wrapped around his throat, and it was all he could do to keep the pressure at a minimum. He pushed back, finding the man's neck and squeezing in turn. Bent back over the wall, his vision swam as he forced air past the Creel's grip.

The battle blurred around them. The Creel hissed and spat, wide-eyed and bleeding. A smell of leather, sweat, and faint

decay assaulted Bastun's senses. No one would come to his aid; none would know the danger that would lie unprotected with his body. From the corner of his eye he could see the silhouette of the city behind and far below him. The cold touch of the Magewarden's memories stirred as he sought to break free.

Another battle from another time sounded in his mind, echoing across Shandaular in screams and the crackle of flames. Phantom fires traced buildings that no longer stood, trailed behind torches set to burn at the Nentyarch's order. Those left behind, running to a portal, an escape that no longer existed, were mercilessly cut down by soldiers.

His eyelids fluttered. Athumrani's spirit grasped him with a chill he felt creeping nearer with each strangled breath. Choking, he pushed back harder, the Creel's pale face and the tall shadow of the tower looming over him. Staring at the flickering windows above, he knew he might die alone and unnoticed, but that he would not be alone for long. He managed one last breath before letting go, his face flushed and warm as his arms fell wide. He gave in to it all just a little—just enough.

Where is your breath?

Exhaling, he whispered, his voice strained and hoarse, his hands grasping at threads of the Weave as he summoned the spell he needed. The Creel seemed to recognize his purpose and shook him all the harder, screaming senselessly as he tried to crush the life from the masked wizard. Bastun closed his eyes and concentrated past the burning in his lungs and the phantom flames of ruined Shandaular, past the screams of the Creel and of those long dead in the streets far below. A wispy scent of smoke curled past his nostrils as the past crept closer to claim him.

An impact shook them both, and the hands around his throat loosened. Opening his eyes, he met the shocked expression of the Creel. Inhaling again, renewed strength flowed through his arms and he brought them together,

clapping the sides of the man's skull with as much force as he could muster. The man shuddered at the blow, his arms went limp and he stumbled backward. Bastun pushed away from the battlements, skin flushed and tingling as air filled his lungs.

A quick punch sent the Creel spinning, revealing the axe buried in his back. Bastun kicked the blade deeper, holding his would-be killer face down in the reddening snow.

The old anger churned in Bastun's stomach, though he kept it in control. Reaching out he gestured to the axe, his spell shaking the weapon free and bringing it to his awaiting hand. Though Athumrani still held sway in his mind, he managed to keep the spirit's influence in check. The Breath seemed to squirm at his side, and he resisted its pull even as he eyed more of the Creel approaching.

Wading into the fray, he became a whirling dervish of dark robes and flashing axe. Though only Creel faced him and fell before his blade, he could feel the cobwebs of the older battle playing around him. Warm blood hissed on the snow and stained his mask as the cold, misty spray of ephemeral wounds splashed across his skin from the ghosts of Nar soldiers. Walking a tightrope between the Weave and wild emotion, he kept his senses sharp.

Cutting down another of the Nar, he noted the growing number of them fallen around the wall. Less than a dozen of the fang lay wounded or dying despite the Creel ferocity. Pulling his axe free and kicking the body to the ground, he backed away from the quieting battle. Duras put another down, as did Syrolf, both warriors suffering only superficial injuries. Once down the Creel hardly struggled. Wounds that slowly bled were allowed to bleed. Swords and axes that might have been wielded, even while injured, were left untouched.

"This has been too easy," he muttered and strained to hear voices speaking that even his mask had difficulty detecting. Fearing that Athumrani's memories were taking him again,

he
sighed in relief as he identified the Common language drifting from within the darkness of the tower. The faint whispering held a solemn rhythm, like a prayer or ritual. He made out the words "fallen brothers" as Duras faced down the last of the Creel. The rest of the fang allowed their leader the kill, forming a semicircle and finishing off those that still groaned. Two quick strokes, one ringing with steel, the other muffled by armor and flesh, finished the battle as Bastun heard the whisperer simply utter "sacrifice."

The parting warriors, breath steaming in the evening air, made way for their ethran. Thaena strode among the fallen, leading her men to the tower. Bastun edged forward, hearing nothing more of the scratchy whisper and peering into the thick shadow of the open doors.

Fleeting and brief, he saw the face and shoulders of a withered old man moving within the dark. Heavy robes enshrouded the figure. The old man disappeared, but a second presence took his place. Night's chill intensified, though the wind had actually calmed. Thaena's steady stride slowed as a white web of frost crawled across the iron-braced open doors. The wave of ice spread and grew thicker —as did the air in Bastun's lungs. Guttering torches were reduced to nothing more than wind-tossed embers and dwindling smoke.

The second face that appeared from the darkness was youthful and sharp. Pale skin bearing a faint flush of warmth graced the handsome, cruel visage. With noble features and a regal bearing he strolled from the tower. His eyes seemed formed of solid ice, bright blue and staring down the length of the wall as if waiting for something. Bastun shivered, not from the cold, but something stirred within him at the sight of the man. He knew that this would be no imposter, no Creel masquerading in the guise of an ancient prince of Narfell. This was Serevan Crell, last son of the Nentyarch of Dun-Tharos and the destroyer of Shandaular.

Bastun felt himself being pulled forward, and this time he did not resist. Whereas Thaena had backed away nervously, Bastun advanced and called spells to mind. The complacent Serevan leaned over the battlements, staring out across the city as if surveying the ancient siege. The sigil of the Nentyarch, faded and torn, twisted and turned in a breeze on Serevan's cloak. The prince paid no mind to the ethran or the warriors arrayed behind her.

Bastun's approach felt weighted down, as if time itself were freezing. The compulsion to attack seemed an agreement between himself and the spirit of the Magewarden. The Breath calmed its nervous squirming at his side with each sluggish step.

The phantoms' battle of the past had also slowed to a standstill, save that Serevan's men were left standing and the Shield's defenders had been killed to a man. Those ghostly soldiers turned their heads lethargically as Bastun moved toward them. No swords were raised nor violence threatened. They parted to let him through, though he had no intention of playing the Magewarden's traitorous role in the city's curse. As the first syllable of a spell crossed his lips, Serevan turned to face him, the first indication that he was aware of anyone on the wall.

The lips of the prince moved, yet his voice was only a scratching whisper of sound as he stood straight and placed a hand on his blade.

"Athumrani," he said, his voice curling coldly in Bastun's ears, as if his very breath could steal life and soul from a body.

The vremyonni paused, spell lost as hatred flashed through his mind. The Magewarden swore in his head, shouting oaths of damnation upon Serevan and the empire he stood for. Bastun fought to catch his breath in the thick air, shocked by Athumrani's reaction.

"Not a traitor," he whispered, incredulous and only slightly relieved. "Then why—?"

Time returned in a rush. Bastun exhaled, heart pounding in the cumbersome cold, though Serevan was still some distance away. A weak voice chanted from within the tower. Arcane mutterings became a surge of commanding power and the darkness there writhed violently. A scent of death wafted over them as the tower's blackness tore itself apart, becoming individual pieces that moaned and fell into a military order before the prince.

Bastun studied the ghostly force. Though they resembled the fallen Creel, their bodies trailed away into misty nothingness below the knees. Fierce eyes of glowing white burned in faces blackened by shadows of their undead state. The ghostly visions of the past had faded, as Serevan Crell's battle joined the present with the Creels' grisly sacrifice of their own souls.

Serevan turned toward the soldiers, seeing only the eager faces of his long-dead countrymen. He spoke again, the language once again familiar, the subtleties lost to time. In his mind though, Bastun understood, hearing all through the Magewarden's memories, an enduring echo of what had come before.

"Spare not the mage," the prince ordered. "Bring me the Breath when he is dead."

Though began in a mockery of some marching order, the wraiths quickly swarmed. They took to the air and rushed the Rashemi in a cloud of misty cloaks and spectral blades.

Tracing runes on the blade of his axe, Bastun muttered incantations for dealing with such spirits. Thaena took up the chant as the fang surged around her to meet the undead.

She picked up a Creel hand axe, casting much the same spell as Bastun, and glanced at the warriors around her. Bastun intuited the source of her concern, knowing the fang would have little defense against the wraiths. Thaena handed the axe to Duras and summoned another spell, just as the undead met the front of the line.

The night swallowed all sound as ghostly blades tore through steel that could not withstand their touch. The ghosts fell among the berserkers as a black rain of shadowy blots, like night's parchment cut into grisly dolls. Occasionally a berserker blade would somehow catch at their forms, tearing them into silky shreds that faded when taken from the whole. Bright bolts of energy flew from Thaena's fingertips, searing into those that came too near. Their twisted faces writhed and mumbled in pain, but their numbers quelled thoughts of hope or victory.

Bastun's axe turned the wraiths' light forms into melting bits of nothing, and still they came. He pushed his way forward, chill bits of insubstantial bodies falling from his blade, burning his arms with the numbing cold of a grave before fading away. Fixing his gaze on the wall ahead, he navigated the battle to reach the long-dead and oblivious prince. No more did sounds or visions of the past plague him. It seemed the Magewarden, if indeed a traitor to his king, was no ally of the invading prince.

Men screamed and fell at all sides, retreating from the life-stealing touch of the wraiths. The warriors gathered near Thaena, encircling their ethran as she called upon the Weave. More of the fang fell back and the circle tightened. Though magic harmed the wraiths, the ethran could not match their numbers. She cried out above the maelstrom of moaning undead and screeching blades. Duras responded and signaled a retreat to the guard tower.

Bastun ignored the summons. Serevan's cold eyes burned ahead of him. Should the prince fall, the Shield's strange curse might be lifted. He had no doubt that the magic forged by King Arkaius would continue its resurrection of Shandaular's last hours, but he might afford the living a reprieve from suffering a similar fate. As he pressed on, stepping over the fallen, the wraiths seemed to sense his intention and crowded closer to block his path.

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His arms grew tired from swinging at what felt like little more than empty air. As he struggled to keep moving, Athumrani's will surged, and the Breath pulled at his side. The sight of Serevan through the fray made the will stronger, and Bastun felt pushed through the wraiths. Their claws reached effortlessly through skin and muscle. Their blades flowed through bone leaving only pain. He fought against the Magewarden's wild emotions, enforcing his will over the entity. His axe rose and fell, growing slower and less accurate.

Once again death reached with rough hands for his soul, and he made a swift choice. Inhaling slowly, he reached for the spell-rage that laid but a heartbeat away when the piercing voice of Anilya rose above everything.

Her spell unleashed a torrent of warm air across his back. Harmless and singing with magic, it Was barely enough to rustle the hem of his robe, but the effect on the wraiths was instantaneous. Their incorporeal forms rippled. Their faces, straining beyond death's grip to be known, screamed as the spell's wind tore them apart. In moments only an echo of their pain was left hanging on the air.

Falling forward, senses clearing, Bastun forced back the fury in his throat. Less than half the wall remained between him and the prince. Serevan turned, his face twisted in confusion. For the briefest of moments, the prince seemed as a sleepwalker, woken from his dream to a reality that he could not comprehend. He moved forward, his steps unsure as madness twisted his features. The blush of life he had taken from the Creel had begun to fade. Sharp cheekbones stood out as taut skin pulled his face slowly back into the rictus grin of unlife.

Anilya's voice rose again. Recognizing the spell, Bastun lurched forward, determined to reach the prince. Tiny motes of ice-blue light danced past him, striking the stone with bright sparks of energy. Where they touched, spikes of ice burst upward, forming a barrier across the wall and keeping

him from his goal. Sorrow flooded through his mind as the Magewarden's will fell apart, torn from the course of time. Bastun placed a hand on the ice, feeling the magic ring's strange warmth flow through his fingers. The quiet curses that escaped his lips were Athumrani's, but the desperation he felt was his own.

Hands grabbed at his shoulders, dragging him back from the ice. He resisted at first, wondering at Athumrani's path, what sorrow had carried the man past Serevan to the Word—and beyond. Arms weak and aching, he thought of his fallen master, wishing Keffrass were there to tell him what he should do. Together they might have done battle against and discussed the peculiar history of the Shield and its odd curse. For a moment he shared in the echo of sorrow that Athumrani had left in his heart. Overpowered by Duras, he reluctantly complied and turned back.

"The wraiths are gone only temporarily," Anilya said to Thaena as the pair approached. "The spell was not enough to destroy them. Get back inside the tower. When they return, I and my men will hold them off as long as we can."

"Why should we trust you?" Syrolf asked.

"I should think there is little choice," she answered, her eyes glancing between them and the icy barrier.

"And even less time to debate the issue," Thaena said. "Get everyone inside the guard tower."

Syrolf did as the ethran ordered, ushering the fang back as the durthans sellswords, down to only four, approached their employer. Duras went on ahead, leaving Bastun to edge along slowly and listen as the two women spoke.

"I'll raise another barrier when you are all inside," Anilya said, producing a small vial of brown liquid from her belt. "It should give you a bit more time."

"We'll gather the blades," Thaena replied, staring after the fang. "I should be able to make enough of them potent against the wraiths."

"Provided they get past me," Anilya said, a dangerous humor

in her voice.
"Yes," the ethran said. "I don't know why—"
"Let's not waste time, Thaena," Anilya said. "Do not place any thought of nobility or honor in my actions. We do what we must for our own reasons."
Bastun looked over his shoulder at the durthan, narrowing his eyes as he turned her words over in his mind. Thaena did not reply, the moment broken as steel cracked against ice from the other side of the wall. The pair parted in silence, Thaena toward the guard tower and Anilya to her men. Serevan thrashed against the ice in front of them, his blurry shape slashing and pounding at the barrier with inhuman force.
Anilya did not flinch, and to their credit the sellswords simply stretched weary muscles and readied their weapons. She looked back after Bastun before he finally turned away and he wondered if, despite her intentions, he had misjudged her character after all.
The doors slammed shut behind him. Swords were laid out before the ethran, who whispered and mumbled in a trance of magic. Her voice strained as she struggled to call upon what power she could from faraway Rashemen.
Bastun paced to the back of the chamber, lost in thought and staring at the packs and possessions of these who might not survive until morning.
chapter Tuueoty-ooe
Tiny imperfections, lengthening and growing darker with each blow, danced just underneath the surface of the ice. Anilya watched them, wondered at the hands that swung the blade on the other side. This forgotten prince, bound in frozen flesh, had orchestrated with cruel precision each trapped spirit in the City of Weeping Ghosts. He ruled here just as his ambition had demanded—now slave to his own folly and a day long since passed. Anilya had broken his day, if only for a few short moments, had denied him his meeting with the vengeful Athumrani. Now, his purpose lost he

turned his rage against the ice that kept him from replaying his fate.

She turned around as the tower doors were shut, and she hurled the vial. The liquid splashed against the doors and the stone, seeping into each as it stained and set roots of magic. Tiny shoots appeared at first, growing at an unnatural rate, spreading into massive trunks and clinging vines. Thorns sprouted on every surface as arcane foliage engulfed the western side of the tower. She observed her work for a moment, making sure that all was in order before turning back to the barrier of ice.

Her warriors watched her expectantly, as if waiting for some plan to be revealed. She told them nothing, unconcerned and confident that they were sufficiently drugged to maintain a semblance of morale. With a whisper, her vision rippled, changing the world that she saw. The spectral realm overlaid reality as a cobweb of images. Smoke drifted by, and she saw Shandaular illuminated by flames. Denied the prize he sought—the city's most unique portal—the Nentyarch had ordered everything burned to the ground. It was to be a message for any who would deny him. Though he had intended a monument of ash, one traitorous son had managed a cursed ruin of ice. In the midst of such destruction, its secrets kept by ghosts, hidden by thick mists and short memory, was left only the Shield.

"As enduring as the magic wrought within its walls," she muttered, remembering the quote from something she had once read. Trying to recall the exact text, her hand drifted to the satchel at her belt and found it gone. Glancing over her shoulder at the guard tower, she sighed and shook her head, "Ah yes. Time is truly our enemy now."

"What is the trick, lady durthan?" The warrior that spoke eyed the ice nervously as did his companions. "Are we to make a deal? A trade perhaps?"

She looked at him, smiling despite herself.

Not as much wine in them as I'd expected, she thought.

"No," she answered. "Though these Creel are dead or dying, more will come, and my sisters will not allow any incursion of the Nar close to Rashemen."
The warrior, a middle-aged nomad of the Cold Road, glanced between the two barriers that sealed them all upon the wall. The long-handled blade in his hand wavered as he considered their limited options.
"Then what are we to do here?" he asked, a note of genuine confusion in his voice—the aftereffects of a steady dosage of thrallwine still hampering his wits. An edge of frustration was making its way to the surface as survival instincts overcame drug-induced bravery. "Our blades are nigh useless if those wraiths return, and your damned prince there, by your own word, isn't likely to take to a grave anytime soon! We're trapped
on top of this wall, and your precious sword is in the hands of that wizard. So what do we do now?"
Smiling behind the mask, she turned as if considering his question. The wall was bereft of phantoms now. Shandaular's day was coming to yet another end. Stars flickered and winked overhead, some disappearing completely as the wraiths slowly remade themselves. A split appeared in the ice—the tip of Serevan's blade piercing the frozen barrier.
"Now?" she said, crossing her forearms and reaching out to the Weave with her will. It was a minor spell she cast, common house-magic for witches of the north dealing with harsh winters. The ice crackled as a spider web of imperfections spread beneath its surface, making it brittle and awaiting the prince's next shattering blow. "Now... we must die."
The first moans of the returning wraiths echoed above as magic swirled at her fingertips.
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Time was broken. The uncomfortable rift between what was happening and what should have happened loomed in Bastun's mind. The Breath, out of balance with the memory

of itself, hung heavy at his side.
In the past, either Athumrani or Serevan had wielded the blade and opened the black door to the Word. Of the two, he could not decide who would have desired such destruction more. Between the prince's ambition and the Magewarden's hate and sorrow, both might have fulfilled the Word's purpose—and both were surely very close when it occurred.
The thought of ambition made him consider Anilya, and though he wished otherwise, he was unable to trust the durthan's act of noble sacrifice. He listened closely for the sounds of inevitable battle outside, wondering what end she might make for herself—if indeed she truly expected to die at the Cold Prince's hands.
He shook his head and smirked beneath the mask, carrying no illusions that she would die an unlikely hero for the sake of Rashemen. For that alone he almost admired her tenacity.
A scream cut through the doors. The dull clash of steel rang in muted tones and the floor shook slightly. The sounds of battle returning his focus to the moment, Bastun tried to appear casual as he scanned the scattered piles of extraneous gear left by the wall.
In the light of a nearby torch, a familiar satchel, unceremoniously tossed among the effects of the Rashemi, caught his eye. He glanced at the others. Thaena sprinkled consecrated soil over the gathered swords before her, casting magic upon them that would sharpen their edges against threats not in the world of the living. The fang waited, respectfully silent and echoing the prayers sent to the Three as they observed their own traditional rituals. Duras and Syrolf stood across from each other, the rivalry between them evident, though muted in the face of the true enemies they would soon encounter.
Taking the moment, Bastun knelt and grabbed the satchel, turning his back to the others and shielding it from view. Waving a hand over its simple latch he detected only minor spells had been put in place to deter prying eyes. It spoke

volumes about Anilya's confidence that she would trust such protection among other spellcasters.
Or, he thought, it means she keeps nothing more inside than cheap wine and dried food.
Trusting his instincts and curious to discover what secrets of the durthan he could, he disarmed the latch's cantrips and reached inside. He pulled forth two large books. The first was likely the durthans spellbook bound in a dark cover, the latch on its side fairly humming with protective wards, and he set it aside carefully. Even among allies, most spellcasters kept their arcane secrets shut away and locked with painful consequences.
More screams came from outside, joined by chilling moans and the sound of spells being cast.
Steel scraped against stone as the Rashemi bent to retrieve their blades. Thaena breathed heavily in the wake of the working she had cast on the weapons. Whispered oaths followed swiftly, members of the fang adding their own humble blessings upon the enchanted weapons. The noise only barely registered at the edge of Bastun's attention. A bead of cold sweat rolled down his brow toward his eye. He blinked it away.
The second book was a much older tome with red leather binding, yellowed pages, and wrapped only in a leather cord. The Nar runes on the cover caught his attention first. By his estimation, they dated the book far older than its appearance suggested. The strange lettering danced under his scrutiny, avoiding his cursory attempt at translation. Just touching the book made him nauseous, and the runes squirmed before his eyes, elusive in their meaning.
The sounds of battle faded, but the groaning chorus of wraiths became stronger. A faint rustling and the sound of chopping wood shook the barred doors.
Setting the books aside, Bastun pulled forth a collection of old parchments and a small brown leather journal. A familiar scent wafted from the pages, and his eyes widened as he

laid them flat, smoothing their curling corners. His heart pounded as he looked them over, hands trembling as he leafed from one to the next. He stopped and stared, clenching his jaw, exhaling slowly as he closed his eyes and swore under his breath.

The doors shook violently, the braces across them bowing beneath the heavy blows that mirrored the beating in his chest. The nearness of the prince caused the Breath to grow cold as a shadow of Athumrani's sorrow-driven hate flashed through his mind. He felt the Magewarden had suffered some loss that had shaken him to his core, and for the moment Bastun did not mind the uninvited company.

With a heavy heart he reached for the journal and opened it to the first page. The signature there as unmistakable to him as his own—Keffrass of Vremyonni. He closed it and laid it among the old scrolls, all of them stolen from the Running Rocks on the night of his master's—his friends—murder.

"Thieving even now, exile?"

He reacted slowly to the voice of Syrolf, the memory of Keffrass's death giving way to emotions more easily dealt with in battle. Looking over his shoulder, he found the blade of the tattooed berserker leveled upon him and ready to strike. Syrolf casually acknowledged the approach of Thaena as if proudly displaying his catch of the vremyonni's indiscretion. The ethran looked down upon him with a stare he had grown to recognize among the wychlaren, even among their pupils. It no longer bothered him much anymore.

Before she could speak, he slid the scrolls and pages around for her to view, laying the durthans satchel alongside them. His eyes never left the small leather journal, the edges of its cover darkened as if singed. Raising a hand close to his mask, he could smell the scent of char from handling the journal. The fiery magic that had laid Keffrass low, he had blamed upon himself, the guilt of it guiding many of his decisions since.

One of the door braces cracked, splinters snapping off and tapping on the floor. Thaena knelt before the gathered pages, her fingers brushing the parchment thoughtfully. Years of research, meticulously collected by the vremyonni, were laid out before her. Much of Shandaular's mystery, here reduced to ink and wizards' secrets, told a tale of ancient magic, terrible empires, and the sacrifice of a single man. She looked up at him, wide-eyed and speechless, then laid a hand on the flat of SyrolFs blade to lower it. He raised an eyebrow in confusion and took a step backward. The simple act drew Bastun's attention from the journal, and he met the ethran's gaze.

He should have felt something—relief at being exonerated completely of his alleged crimes, his actions justified in the presence of an old friend once lost—but there was nothing there. He felt hollow.

The braces broke. The doors swung free and a fierce cold invaded the chamber. Night hung with burning eyes behind the ivory figure of Serevan, stolen warmth again filling his sunken visage. The fang fell back before the feeding chill of the bleakborn prince, but it was only a momentary retreat. Berserker rage was upon them, and there before them stood the cause of all recent sorrow and chaos. Exhaled breaths became wolflike growls, and gleaming swords marked a sharp line between the prince and their ethran.

"Athumrani!" Serevan's voice sliced through the room, his ice-rimmed eyes resting on Bastun.

The emptiness within Bastun filled. The trapped spirit of the Magewarden writhed to answer the call, and Bastun rose with him. His axe blade screamed to life as spells swarmed through his mind.

The discordant voices of the wraiths moaned and hissed in answer to the berserkers' growls. Their floating mass surged, a roiling storm of gloom as they poured into the room. Black blades raised high as they descended upon the Rashemi and rang loudly as they were blocked and turned away. Sibilant

whimpers escaped many of the spirits at being denied an easy victory, but they pushed their numbers hard against the fang. Bastun lost sight of Serevan as the wraiths engulfed the doorway and shrouded everything in darkness.
Syrolf charged, slicing deep into the wraith's body. The spirit shimmered at the blade's touch, its bright eyes widening as it fought back with a speed unchecked by physical reality. Bastun skirted the edges of the chaos, searching for Serevan among the crowd.
Flashes of sparkling light exploded from the opposite end of the chamber—Thaena's voice rising in victory as several of the undead dissipated into nothing. Bastun summoned his own spell, calling forth a nimbus of flame that glowed and flickered around his hand. A wraith flew too near, and he grasped at its neck, the flames searing through the night
black creature. It clawed at his arm as he waded into the fray with the screeching thing. Within the unnatural darkness, the Rashemi appeared as solid silhouettes as they slashed and cut the wraiths to ribbons. Some, fighting despite their wounds, thrashed as the undead surrounded them and pulled them to the ground.
The wraith in Bastun's fist groaned and fell apart, its form drifting and caressing his skin like a veil of cobwebs before disappearing. Slicing his axe forward, he felled another of the spirits and another, ignoring the cold bum of claw marks on his arm. He realized he was alone, breaking through an invisible circle and surrounded by the white eyes of the desecrated Creel warriors. Gnarled claws and ghostly blades reached to scratch and stab at him, but he held them back.
His foot brushed against something solid. Glancing down he saw the body of a berserker, curled upon the floor, skin white as unbroken snow. Through a brief break in the dark, he caught a glimpse of the west wall, the distant tower of the Word, and the bodies lying broken and bloodied in the snow. The sellswords lay dead, their mistress sprawled out among them, lifeless.

"No!" he whispered in disbelief, stunned by a pang of guilt followed quickly by a sense of vindication: his master's murderer lay dead. Wraiths blocked his view, moaning as they spun in circles around the Rashemi.

Warmth spread down his arm and through his body. Fever set his senses aflame as he sought the source of the sensation. He turned, slashing into shadow after shadow. He could hear the others struggling to fight the numerous spirits, but only as if from a great distance.

A blazing light appeared from the midst of the darkness, and he recoiled at the sight of it, his eyes burned by the sudden radiance. It pressed closer and touched him upon the shoulder. A jolt of power rushed through his body. Every muscle danced and clenched as he was thrown across the chamber. He
slammed into the floor and slid several feet before stopping. His axe, still in his grip, scraped across stone.

He worked his jaw slowly, his mask chafing against skin that felt raw and exposed. The light of a nearby torch flared as his eyes rolled back. He shook and spasmed, gritting his teeth as he forced unwilling muscles to respond. Gulping for air like a landed fish, he managed to place a palm down on the floor and push himself up. Blinking and shaking his head, the taste of copper filled his mouth, and he lifted his mask to spit as he awkwardly regained his feet. The prince appeared, striding through the throng of wraiths, his deathly pallor passing through the spirits and giving the illusion that he was the ghost and not they.

The wraiths no longer came near the vremyonni, focusing their anger on the fang instead. Frost coated the ground where the prince stepped, rushing ahead of him as his aura moved. The ice hesitated at the hem of Bastun's robes, and where he expected freezing, he found burning. Sweat poured down his face, meeting the contours of his mask and dripping down his neck. Serevan raised an ungloved hand, a graceful finger pointing at him.

"Magewarden," the prince said, his voice now seeming to echo through Bastun's mind.
The Breath grew colder against his leg, a relief from the oppressive heat that pulsated across his flesh. Athumrani's thoughts swelled from the blade, flooding his head with more voices, memories, and emotions.
"We had a deal, Athumrani. You betrayed me once. Do not make the mistake of doing so again."
Bastun could feel the Magewatden's mind, struggling to answer. There was to be an exchange: the Shield's secrets for... something. Pain lanced behind his eyes as the pressure of two minds became too much to bear, and he shouted as the dead wizard's words commanded his voice.
"Y-you took her! Used her!"
Bastun choked on the words, inhaling swiftly as he fell to one knee.
"The girl," he muttered as the source of Athumrani s shame and sorrow revealed itself in his mind. He looked with dread toward the tower stairwell behind him. There, peering fearfully around the corner, more translucent than before, barely more than a memory herself, stood the child, the little girl. The others were barely a haze behind her, tiny dots of darting eyes afraid to look upon the prince that had designed their deaths. The young girl stared at him with fearful eyes, tiny gleaming tears streaking down her face as she looked not at him... but at her father's tortured spirit.
"Athumrani's daughter."
"Your king is dead, and your city is burning," Serevan said. "This stand is less than noble and I'll befits a man of your wisdom. Surrender the blade and the ring."
Bastun's hand drifted to the Breath, feeling the cold metal pulsing beneath his touch.
"The ring?" He stood, less of his own volition and more as a player's puppet on strings of time. The strange ring did indeed play some part along with the Breath—a secret kept from him, possibly even from Keffrass.

His head slowly shook from side to side, the Magewarden refusing to yield. A catch formed in his throat, and Bastun choked down Athumrani's reply. The rushing pace of history as it caught up with the present was overwhelming, but he managed to assert himself—control himself—long enough to ignore the well-tread paths of ghosts and memories.

The axe blade raised sparks as it scored the stone, swinging in a powerful arc at Serevan's neck. It sang as it met the prince's own blade, drawn and placed with a cruel precision. Denied the cut, Bastun drew back to swing again, the motion as reflexive as the spells that sprung to mind. The magic curled in his gut, spinning with the blade as the words crowded themselves on his tongue. He backstepped as Serevan advanced, the prince's actions no longer following the paths of the past.

Their blades met again, the clash of metals matching the rhythm of his casting. Though Serevan snarled, his face a mask of confusion at the re-enactment that refused to obey set course, his skill with the thin blade he carried was formidable and unhindered by the chaos he was experiencing. His white lips moved, mumbling and whispering words of magic that overlaid Bastun's own intonations.

Power flowed from the vremyonni's chest, gathering at his shoulder as he raised his arm to ditect the energy he had summoned. It danced through his muscles, slid along sinew and bone, through his wrist, and flared into a sparkling yellow light at his palm—and then died.

With a final syllable, the spark was reflected in the glassy eyes of the prince as he countered and dismissed Bastun's attempt to harm him. Eyes widening in shock, Bastun fell back as Serevan's blade came again—and faster. He swung the heavy axe against the quick and elegant thrusts of the smaller weapon. The axe-staff became more shield than weapon as the prince fell more out of step with his past and into the murderous fury of the sleeper awoken from a dark

and terrible dream.
The proximity to the bleakborn was stifling. The numbing cold that froze anything else burned Bastun's skin like a bonfire. Frost surrounded them, ice formed on the floor, yet melted wherever he set foot. The hunger in Serevan's eyes took on a maddening gleam as his cheeks sank in upon themselves. The cracks and rot of a long-frozen death began to spread through the prince's features.
"The ring!" the prince rasped, his semblance of life falling apart.
Pain lanced through his side as the bleakborn's blade found an opening. He groaned as the sword was pulled free, blood spattering the floor. He doubled over and Serevan kicked him to the ground.
A scratchy sound like dried leaves escaped a throat that had fallen apart, exposing the lifeless gray tissue beneath. The sword
hovered high, its edge wavering in the drawn-out heartbeats that came when death neared. Clutching his wound, Bastun looked upon the blade and wondered if this too was a part that Athumrani had played. Pain and the sudden shock of mortality brought an unexpected clarity to his thoughts. He couldn't raise his axe in time to stop the sword, but it didn't seem to matter as much as he'd expected only moments before.
The blade fell, a silver stroke of lightning through the storm of darkness that threatened to overtake his vision. The room blurred, something shoved him out of the way, and he rolled onto his stomach. Steel sang like a stricken anvil as he glanced up and saw Duras standing in his place. Swords locked, the berserker and the prince tested one another's strength.
Bastun watched in horror as telltale frost crawled over Duras's gauntlet and the sunken pits of Serevan's cheeks swelled slightly with a blush of renewed warmth.
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chapter Tuueotu-Tujo

tumbling toward the stairwell, Bastun leaned against the doorframe and gripped the wound in his side. In between pained breaths he reached inside his robes, just beneath the light armor he wore. Focusing on casting a spell and watching the duel between Duras and Serevan, he warded off the effects of shock. Blood ran between his fingers as he completed the spell. He cried out as a burning pain seared the wound shut, but he kept his eyes open, his mind alert, and used the pain as further reminder that he was still alive.

Duras's blade gleamed as it blocked another of the prince's thrusts. He hacked at the thin blade with his larger sword, threatening to snap the smaller weapon in two. It stubbornly held and kept coming.

Bastun carefully removed his palm from the sealed puncture. The smell of his own scorching flesh was slight compared to the scent of dying wraiths that hung on the air in a gray haze. Their numbers had thinned, but they'd taken more than their share of Rashemi along with them. Barely ten still stood alongside Syrolf and Thaena, blocked into a circle of swinging blades. Bastun could not help but wonder at the faces of such familiar strangers. Torchlight flashed over the battlefield, obscured intermittently as the howling spirits encircled those still alive.

Hefting his axe, Bastun pushed away from the wall. Hesitant to cast any magic for fear of striking Duras, he circled

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and waited for an opening. Serevan's features had reformed quickly in the presence of the big warrior, but Duras fought on despite the sickly pallor he now wore. His sword crashed against the prince's shoulder, denting the elaborate armor and sending a shower of ice to the floor. Serevan ignored the hit and punched Duras in the chest. The force of the blow sent the warrior stumbling backward.

Bastun thrust his axe forward to fill the opening, only to have it deflected downward. The swift sword rose to slash at

his side, and Bastun backstepped protectively. Too late he tealized his mistake, hearing the prince's voice whispering arcane words. With a casual gesture Serevan sent magical force slamming into Bastun's stomach. He flew through the air and crashed into the wall. Hitting the floor, he wheezed for breath as Duras resumed a furious attack.

Through the open door across the chamber, Bastun could see the dark splotches on the snow-covered wall. The sight of the bodies—Anilya's body—drove him to keep moving. With a desperate determination he picked up his axe. Blinking away sweat and the tears from coughing for air, he turned to find Duras, his back facing Bastun as the berserker met the Cold Prince.

A sudden silence seized his attention. Two still forms stood face to face in an awkward embrace. Serevan's visage pulsed with life, only his eyes held on to the hazy blue of ice. Duras's head rolled to one side, his sword clattered to the stone, a scarlet-stained sliver of bright steel sprouting from his back. His legs continued to push, trying to stand, but failing in the task as his strength was drained by the wound and the bleakborn's feeding.

With a shrug, the prince pulled his blade from the warrior's chest. Duras fell backward, still fighting to keep his balance like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Bastun caught him beneath his shoulders and slumped under his weight. Blood gushed over his robes and stained his hands, his eyes only

just registering the dark crimson color that spilled over him. It streamed across the stone, filling cracks and melting frost, creating a sickening red slush. Duras shook in his arms, eyes rolling in their sockets.

The crunch of a boot startled Bastun out of his momentary shock. He did not look up. Instinct sent his hands into action. In a trance, words spilled forth from his mouth as he studied his blood-drenched hand. An old scar on his palm made him recall the last time he had touched his friend's

blood.
The last of the spell thundered down his arm, energy quaking through his wrist as his fist shot forward. Air parted at spell's edge, a vacuum forming as the image of his fist grew and blurred into a massive battering ram. Serevan's arms and legs flailed as he was struck and flung through the chamber. Wraiths parted and hissed as he fell through them and disappeared, his armor scraping against stone and crunching against the opposite wall.
Then Bastun breathed again, air rattling from his lungs as he shook in a barely controlled fury. That seething anger lessened a moment as he met Duras's half-lidded eyes.
"Bas-Bastun..." he said, lips almost blue and stained with drops of blood. The vremyonni shook his head as if silence would keep his friend alive, somehow hold death at bay, but Duras continued, "No, I must... Ulsera, your sister..."
"Don't," Bastun said quietly, but his friend was beyond hearing, and the sound of his sister's name quelled any further protest within him.
"I took her there... to the Urlingwood. They found us... the guardians. I hid"—a choking sob escaped him—"I ran away... but they—they killed her. We were just... children."
His eyes stared off into nowhere, reliving the events in his mind. In the absence of the bleakborn's presence, a chill had returned to Bastun, coldet now as Duras spoke. Feeling numb,
he sat motionless, his dying friend in his arms. A sudden fierce focus filled the warrior's gaze.
"I should have died there. Not her. Too scared to tell anyone... just a child... and they blamed you." The words cut deep, and the first stirrings of some emotion began to churn in Bastun, "I had no courage. So many... years."
Bastun trembled, tears never spilled welled in his eyes and still he choked them back.
"I die... for her. Giving this... to you. Forgive me."
"You are forgiven, Duras," he said without hesitation as

Duras's eyes lost their focus. A final shuddering breath left his friend, his childhood blood-brother, lifeless and silent. Carefully he let Duras's body slip from his arms, the last secrets of a shattered past sitting quietly in his heart—before returning his attention to the present and the Nar prince.

Bastun stood slowly, purposefully, the tip of his axe resting on the floor as he closed his eyes and breathed. He began to count backwards, matching his heartbeat and performing the old rituals.

Where is your breath?

He let go of the surrounding world, of memory and petty anger, of life and pain, and the sensation of his own presence. In that space lay a balance between living flesh and the Weave of magic—a cooperation of spell and primal thought.

Skin tingling, the familiar fever of Serevan's presence washed over him. The Breath trembled, the bound spirit of the Magewarden reaching out in anger and sorrow. Bastun allowed the intrusion but kept it in check, maintaining an authority over Athumrani's desires. The sounds of battle rose in volume, resonating with an order that wrapped itself around him.

Opening his eyes, he watched as Serevan appeared through the gloom of wraiths, ever hungering for the power of the Breath and the Word. The stain of his fallen friend's last battle still darkened the prince's blade. Bastun would give in to history, to all of Athumrani's anger and his madness, but he
would give direction to that wild emotion. He would give the Magewarden what he truly needed. He would give him rage.

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Swords still lay in freezing hands. White faces stared in horror against the ground or looked sightlessly up into the clear, night sky. Dim stars reflected in eyes glazed over with death. Gaping wounds would fill with snow and ice over

time, taking over their forms and cementing them against the stone like sttange sculptures of grim warning. The durthan's sellswords, their unwitting souls soaked into the stone, pulled down by the Shield's curse and Ilythiiri magic to haunt Shandaular till chance or mercy set them free.

Blood and ice encrusted Anilya's hair. Dark cuts crisscrossed her skin, and powerful cuts had rent her robes. One of her arms was twisted, fingers crushed beneath the heel of the passing prince. Her mask lay askew, revealing her face.

A gentle snow began to fall. Still and silent, the quiet of the scene was broken only by the echoing sounds of battle and the phantom flames of Shandaular's burning. Ghostly smoke intermingled with the ever-present mists that thickened as dawn cast the first faint glow of a distant sunrise.

An orphan of time, the Shield was a ghost of stone and ice suffering nightmares of history.

"I will free you," a voice said wistfully.

The body of Anilya shimmered, the image rippling away to reveal the body of a fallen man. The sellsword had suffered many of the same injuries as the illusion that had obscured him, but he had fought with sword and shield before dying at the hands of wraiths and the time-worn prince. Anilya had fought with magic. She turned from the battlements, her form still invisible, to peer into the living darkness of the guard tower. Hidden from the eyes of the living and the dead, she watched and waited.

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Magic tingled through Bastun's body, the room blurring for a moment as his eyes reacted to the unnatural speed that filled him. His axe swayed menacingly, lighter and faster to match Serevan's quick sword. The fever returned in full, skin burning as if bare under a desert sun. The prince's feeding cold could not touch him, caused him not the slightest chill. The ring on his hand had begun to burn as well, its metal hot to the touch. Whatever Ilythiiri magic had been woven into the simple band was somehow connected with Serevan's

goals and the Shield's history. But Bastun had no time for history now. He was becoming a part of it.
Their blades met twice in the space of a blink, sparks flying. The prince's mindless anger had faded, his reason now accepting the re-enactment of his duel with Athumrani. No longer beset by unfamiliarity with history's course, he settled back into the cruel and efficient stoicism of Nar royalty. His fighting stance was more open and arrogant than the mindless undead he had become.
Black light exploded from Bastun's open palm, the beam searing through Serevan's chest. The prince howled in pain and whirled away, ashes falling from where lifelike flesh and solid armor once had been. Bastun followed closely, slicing with the axe and adjusting his position to keep Serevan off balance. They exchanged blows again, and Bastun loosed the dark beam a second time, burning it into the prince's leg. Icy skin and muscle fell away, exposing bone. Serevan cried out in pain and began casting a spell of his own.
Unleashing a torrent of attacks, Bastun spun and turned, keeping the prince's attention far too busy to complete the spell. The rhythm of the spell-rage felt good, settled within him calmly in contrast to the wild bloodlust of the berserkers. Athumrani did not struggle or assault him with commands or memories. In truth, Bastun was not sure the spirit could affect
him as crudely as it had before. The Weave surged like waves around him. He matched its swells with magic and its troughs with steel.
The black light of his previous spell died away as he parried and struck, carrying his axe blade to his enemy's side. The wounds he had opened were already closing, healing as Serevan spent his stolen life replacing the illusion of living flesh. The prince could not accept the reality of his undead state, believing himself alive and on the cusp of victory each night. Bastun had counted on this denial and smiled grimly as the first shadows of sunken flesh began to plague his

opponent's face.
The wraiths avoided the pair, flying around them as they dived and circled the struggling Rashemi. More of the spirits had been slain, but more than enough remained to threaten their thinning chances. Syrolf still fought at the ethran's side, but Thaena's voice had grown weak and hoarse.
Bastun backstepped, spreading his arms wide. With one hand he deflected the prince's blade and with the other waved over the dropped blades and weapons of his fallen countrymen. Magic drifted from his fingertips, and he reversed his spin, thrusting with his axe and battering at Serevan's sword. A moment's hesitation and a nicked wrist revealed the first sign of a sluggishness infecting the bleakborn nobleman's movements. With a final thrust Bastun stepped away, backing up and kneeling on the stone floor.
Eyes closed, he concentrated on the magic seeded in the items around him. Only the smallest of the blades responded. Hard-tipped short swords and daggers rattled as they rose on their points and spun into the air. He stood quickly and raised his axe, catching the prince's sword at the last moment. Tiny fractions of his focus floated in the small blades and he growled as he pushed back against Serevan's unnatural strength. Twisting to his right, he kicked at the prince's leg, setting Serevan off balance.
Bastun exhaled and released the swarm of blades. They flew unerringly at their target, a few parried and sent spinning to the ground before the others struck home. A look of shock crossed the bleakborn's face, lasting only a moment as his chest, legs, and arms were stabbed by the flying arsenal. The blades tore through the illusion of life which tried to replace itself with each new wound. Daggers clattered to the floor, pushed out by renewing flesh that looked less alive and more scarred each time. As the last shortsword slipped from his stomach, the prince seemed more the walking corpse he was than the man he thought himself to be.

Serevan's step faltered, and his head shook in denial. A thin whisper of a voice tried to speak past a shriveled tongue and a lipless skull's grin. Bastun knew he could not truly slay the prince. The Shield would keep its tormented conqueror alive night after night, but the vremyonni only needed to make it through one night, slay the Nar prince this once, for Duras. Taking the advantage he raised his axe high and brought it down with all the strength he could muster.

The blade found only a thin sword awaiting it. The weapons shook violently, the force of the blow reverberating down the length of Bastun's arms as he stared into the maddened face of the undead prince. Serevan hissed, his nose now little more than a bit of tissue on the emerging skull beneath. Hunger drove the prince's furious attack, slashing and clawing such that the vremyonni was forced backward, trying to keep up with each blow.

Catching an opening he returned the assault, venting his anger and matching the bleakborn's madness. His blood burned, the pain of his wounds and his aching muscles long forgotten and ignored. Arcane speed made their battle a blur of flashing metal, a cacophony of unintelligible curses and chanting.

Blue light sparked from Bastun's hands, arcing through Serevan and spinning outward as it illuminated the spectral bodies of the wraiths. Shrill screams echoed throughout the tower, but despite the hole blasted through his stomach the prince fought on.

His sword hooked beneath Bastun's axe and tore it from his hands. It clanged against a wall obscured by shadows, and Serevan lunged. Bastun deflected the blade. The prince stared with dawning recognition at the wavy-bladed long sword wielded against him.

With heaving breaths, Bastun slashed Serevan back, having drawn the Breath on instinct and now finding himself fully locked in Athumrani's mindless battle for revenge. He gave the Magewarden his due and pressed upon Serevan with the

vengeance of two men.
To him, the Breath now seemed the coldest object he had ever touched. It numbed his hand, froze his fingers in a vice around the leather-wrapped handle. Its blade served him as a weapon, but its purpose sent chills through his soul.
Serevan fell back, mesmerized by the artifact he had long sought but never truly seen in so many centuries. Only the ghost of the blade had been wielded by Athumrani. Only the memory of its ultimate use had washed over Serevan at the end of each long night. Absently he dropped his own sword and stared at his withered hands, a raspy breath of fear escaping him at the sight of his own death. Bastun swung the Breath wildly, scraping its tip across the bleakborn's breastplate.
They had neared the others. Bastun could see the silhouettes of Thaena and Syrolf through the haze of wraiths. Serevan noticed as well, sensing the warmth of the living and drawn to it. He dived through his undead servants to reach the Rashemi, leaving Bastun to the spirits.
Filmy garments of the dead clouded his vision as he stabbed and slashed through the fallen Creel. Cold claws reached through his robes, tearing at his spirit, but he shrugged them away. A whispered spell created a nimbus of gray light to surround him, the arcane aura shielding him against the hungry wraiths. The miasma of insubstantial bodies parted, and
he found Serevan but a few strides away. Thaena had been knocked aside and she shivered, struggling to stand. Syrolf was bent on one knee, locked in a deadly embrace with the bleakborn who turned and smiled as his strength returned.
Bastun charged, tackling the prince from the side and sending them both rolling to the ground. Syrolf was knocked free, and Bastun tumbled with Serevan, followed by wraiths seeking to protect their prince.
He punched and kicked at the icy skin of the bleakborn, his knuckles bleeding from the effort. Darkness shrouded his

eyes as wraiths tore at his robes and pulled at his hair. Though their claws scraped uselessly at the magic that protected his flesh, he was afforded no such protection against Serevan. Cold hands held him down, scratched at his mask, and pried at the fingers wrapped around the Breath. Bastun's strength could not hold. He felt his grasp loosen even as the prince's fist tightened around his neck. The sword fell away from his grip, thundering as it struck the floor.

They both scrambled for the weapon. Through the darkness, tiny white sparks filled Bastun's eyes as his lungs burned. Useful spells flitted elusively through his mind, his thoughts now scattered in a void once filled by Athumrani.

Steel skittered across stone, and he felt the weight of the prince lifted from his chest. He coughed and hacked as the wraiths fled. Syrolf stood over him, sword flashing in the torchlight as he cut down yet another of the ebony spirits.

Several feet away, Serevan lurched awkwardly toward the Breath on legs of bone and withered flesh. Bastun grasped upon the magic trapped in his mind. The Weave responded as he chanted, voice reed-thin and the words painful to speak. Whispering the name of the final rune, a tiny white mote of light appeared in the air and drifted toward the prince. Blue flames gathered around the light as it careened and swirled like a snowflake. Landing at the bleakborn's feet, it exploded upward, an azure bonfire of wintry chill.

Consumed by the cold lire, the prince collapsed, curling onto the floor as his last vestiges of warmth were burned away in the freezing flame. Bereft of their prince, the undead Creel moaned and howled, the vigor of their attack renewed.

Thaena summoned bright spheres of sparkling energy that danced and darted around them. Dragged by Syrolf to the wall, Bastun pushed himself up, still shaking the cobwebs from his mind, but aware enough that the sharp edge of steel on stone caught his attention.

Through the blackness of tattered garments and incorporeal

shapes he could see her. She stood unharmed among the spirits, ignored by them as they screamed and clashed with the handful of Rashemi. At her feet lay the twitching, desiccated corpse of Serevan. For a moment he wondered at the image, thinking her a ghost. Despite the darkness and howling dead that separated them, he knew he looked into the durthans eyes—and he knew she was smiling. In Anilya's hand, its point resting on the floor, was the Breath.

With a casual grace she turned and left, stepping out into the winter night with all that he feared in her grasp.

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chapter Tvuenty-Three

ewfallen snow crunched beneath Anilya's boots. The dead lay scattered around the wall—acceptable and well-planned losses in exchange for what she sought. Even the Nar had performed their duties well, buying into her tale of the risen prince and a newfound Narfell. Only the Creel had such ambition, and she had approached them fully confidant that they would believe her tale. They had followed her across plain and Cold Road to the gates of Shandaular, fearless zealots in search of destiny.

"Pity the entire tribe wasn't as foolish," she muttered and recalled the destruction of the wychlaren wards, how well it had reminded the unwitting hathrans of the true nature of the city they had chosen to entrap themselves within. As Rashemi magic failed, the Shield resumed its nightly course with a vengeance through once protected halls. Outnumbered and unprepared for the curse within the walls, all had gone mostly as expected. Except for Ohriman. She sighed, missing the tiefling's company with a passing fondness. The Breath flashed pulses of cold up her arm as she neared the entrance to the northwest tower, making her forget the fallen assassin completely.

Howls and cries still reached her from within the guard tower—the actual battle unseen for the raving wraiths' dark forms. The vremyonni, exile or not, had resisted her far more

than she had expected, but his presence, and the company that it had brought, had proven a boon beyond measure. Her foray into Rashemen, posing as a traveling hathran to infiltrate the Running Rocks, had yielded more than she had hoped for and yet far less than what she needed. Finding the Breath without one of the hathrans' pet wizards was not a task she had looked forward to, but then Bastun had appeared and performed admirably.

His voice and that of Thaena's could be heard above the din behind her, hurling spells at the restless dead. The Rashemi fervor for battle was curious to her in light of their inaction against the enemies that surrounded them. Only when faced by the threats they feared did they do something other than watch and wait for the next invasion of their precious homeland. Shaking her head, she ignored the end of her convenient allies and looked instead to the task at hand.

She studied the blade of the Breath, marveling at the intricate patterns entwined along its length. Ilythiiri runes dominated much of the pattern, the long-forgotten elves' brand of magic as of yet unfamiliar to her, but its effects on the history of the world unmistakable. By magic and ambition their nation was thrown into ruin, forced into the deep of the Underdark. The origins of the drow echoed in some small part of the blade she carried and no doubt thundered through the folly of King Arkaius in the sealed chamber above.

A hoarse whispering caught her attention, and she paused on the threshold of the tower. With a wave and a word she struck the vibrating chords of the Weave and felt magic sing through the air around her. Snowflakes pulled together, gathering in clumps, compressing themselves into shards of ice that hovered and waited by her command. At a single nod she hurled them through the doorway and heard them shatter and crack.

A sharp smell of death on a winter wind wafted from within and spoke of the silence and relative peace that awaited her.

Satisfied that she would remain unmolested by any remaining
Creel or the self-important shamans that led them, she entered the tower and instantly felt a charge in the air. Gooseflesh rose on her skin, and the Breath tugged at her wrist like an excited child. The first steps of a frost-shrouded stairway on her left led upward into a forbidding dark. The sword begged to be taken to its place, to the lock upon the door to which it alone was the key. Peering intently at the crossguard, she sensed a sentience inside the weapon, hidden thoughts slipping beyond her scrutiny.
Giving the sword its lead, she followed, holding on to its cold as she took the first step and breathed in a scent of power.
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Bastun could number them now, counting as he did through the sweat and pain, desperately seeking the energy to keep moving. A dagger in his hand glowed a dull red as it slashed through the twisting face of a diving wraith. It felt solid only for a moment, like stabbing into loose sand being washed away by a strong tide.
"Six," he muttered, then, "Five."
Syrolf took another, his blade trailing shreds of shadow as shrieks faded to whistling on the wind. The remaining Rashemi numbered five as well, a handful of berserkers panting and heaving with each weary swing. Their famed bloodlust was cut short by the cold touch of the howling spirits. Bastun staggered along the wall, intent on following the durthan. The wraiths moved to stop his escape, the fighting Rashemi in their wake.
He slumped against the stone, catching his breath and reaching within for the strength to cast another spell. More bodies littered the floor, now visible as the wraiths' ranks dwindled. From across the chamber, heart-wrenching sobs reached his ears and he tried not to see her falling over the prone form.
Thaena had found her guardian and had broken. Her mask

flung to the ground, her tears fell over Duras's face, streaming down his cheeks. The sorrow in her eyes bordered on madness. She paid no mind to the wraiths or her fallen fang. She had not seen the return and escape of the durthan. Nothing mattered to her save the love lost and all that had lain unresolved between them.

Bastun saw himself, saw the body of Keffrass, and felt the grief of that passing. He imagined his own body lying in the several places he should have died in his long path to this stretch of wall. There were no tears to pave his way into the afterlife. The empty well within him, the void he felt himself becoming, surged with something as he felt himself disgusted with the mere notion of self-pity.

He pushed away from the wall, slashing and cutting at spirits that flew too near, his other hand tracing intricate symbols in quick graceful movements as he chanted.

Four, he thought as a wraith was spitted on the blade of a berserker.

The young man's face was yet another familiar stranger, his name a mystery, though Bastun was sure he'd heard it spoken once or twice. It was a trait that he loathed finding in himself, but he did not dwell on the shortcoming.

His pulled a fistful of dust from within his robes. Scattering it on the ground in a rough circle he willed the words of his spell into each particle. Dust became a brown mist, darkening to a deep umber and rising with a crackling noise. The spinning storm of magic lashed out at the wraiths, pulling them in and tearing at their forms. It grew and spread, hiding them all within its folds. The Rashemi watched suspiciously, backing away from the thundering magic.

As it consumed the undead and tore them apart, Bastun heard a quiet scratching at the floor. One warrior, one of the first to fall when darkness had claimed the chamber, lay pale and drained nearby. The vremyonni watched in horror as the

body's fingers twitched and splayed. He felt sick as a similar noise arose behind him and then again far to his left.
The dying breath of a fallen warrior nearby hissed away slowly, steaming in the cold air for a moment before ceasing. Within an arm's length of the dead man, ice shattered and popped as the ancient prince of Narfell clenched a clawed fist.
Bile rose in Bastun's throat and he swayed away from the thinning cloud, its shrieking burden destroyed and leaving only the scent of decay. His eyes rolled as he turned from one corpse to the next, noting signs of movement or growing shadow.
"The dead are defeated," he mumbled, recalling passages from the notes of Keffrass concerning the Shield's peculiar curse. Only now did the obscure ideas and discoveries he had studied fully make sense as he added, "And long live the dead."
He met the blank stare of Thaena from across the room. The light of her eyes was gone, and for a moment he feared that she too had joined the ranks of the walking dead. Faint puffs of steam still escaped her parted lips. Duras lay cradled in her arms, thankfully peaceful for the quiet death that ordinary steel had given him.
Finding his balance, Bastun shook his head and picked up a discarded sword.
A groan rang in the air. Dark translucent hands peeled away from one of the bodies followed by a thin arm and the wispy trappings of a desecrated soul. Movement forced stale air from the lungs of another wraith still trapped in flesh, its horrid wail of grisly birth echoing through the short-lived silence. As newborn wraiths crawled from Rashemi corpses, Bastun realized not all of their previous adversaries had been of the Creel—some had likely been of the Rashemi, of those fallen far below in the entrance hall and left to rot.
Familiar strangers, the faces without names, shuffled off the coils of death to haunt him anew. The point of his sword

raised slowly, ready to end himself for fallen friends and with acquaintances never made. A hand pushed against the center of his chest, and he started as Syrolf appeared in front of him, looking over his shoulder.

"Go," the warrior said, his grumbling voice now even more so. "Stop the durthan."

"It doesn't matter," he replied. "It's too late, I—"

"It's only too late if you've decided to quit," Syrolf said. "I don't know what she's planning, but I'd rather not die knowing she succeeded."

Bastun took a step backward, staring at the rising dead, at the weary warriors that hacked at writhing bodies and insubstantial spirits. Their ethran stirred slowly, her attention torn between Duras and her duty. She took up her discarded mask loosely in her hand and stared at it as if betrayed. The bones beneath Serevan's white armor cracked as he tried to rise, straining at the ice that had frozen him to the stone.

The vremyonni's boot crunched on snow. Flakes fell on his shoulders and hair. He realized that despite all, he was leaving. Logic drifted to the surface of his thoughts, and reluctantly he latched himself to it, filling his willpower with what must be done. He would leave his comrades to die and commit himself to the duty of a vremyonni.

As he turned away, the image of Anilya, gripping the Breath and walking toward the northwest tower, burned itself into his mind.

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Each step upward felt like a step backward. Anilya almost glanced over her shoulder, imagining reflections of herself walking away, staring up, her own eyes fixed on her back. Though she progressed forward, time seemed to move in reverse. The ice grew thicker, each stair more dangerous and misshapen than the last. Man-made walls disappeared beneath

a frozen facade, a wintry cavern likely un-tread by the living

since its creation. Blurry faces rested just beneath the surface, their mouths open in quiet screams, their weapons dropped in pursuit of escape and caught before hitting the stone. Soldiers of old Narfell, perhaps trusted officers or supporters of Serevan's ambition, had been the first to realize their mistake.

The farthei she ascended, the less human these faces appeared. Hideous sculptures spanned clawed arms from one wall to the other. Insectile mandibles framed open jaws teeming with needle-sharp fangs. Long, barbed tails rose to the ceiling, hovering over fleeing prey. There was no flesh beneath these images; the trapped fiends seemed frozen only in spirit or presence.

The Breath trembled in her grip, pulling her faster. Its blade gleamed with a white torrent, the image of a blinding blizzard in waves of steel. She shivered as what little light behind her was swallowed in a slow, hesitant darkness. Stone and ice bruised as the ghostly children kept pace with her, but they did not approach the sword in her hand. Bright eyes darted in and out of those shadows, fearful to see and unable to look away.

Cautiously she turned sideways, pointing the Breath at them as she continued climbing. They slowed but maintained their morbid vigil. The stairway grew colder, the ice more jagged, and the children stopped. Their shadows retreated. Anilya felt as though she stood over an immense gulf. Shaking, she turned and stared briefly into the heart of a limitless abyss.

She averted her eyes, doubling over as the wind was stolen from her lungs. Gasping for air, she focused her eyes on the edges of the black doorway. Carved into an arch, it was a likeness of the city's shattered portal in shape only. The runes here were like those upon the Breath—Ilythiiri and human magic merged by the hands of King Arkaius. The elven symbols, once laid separate from the human ones, now

locked themselves in crude knots. They seemed to writhe in the stone, wrestling one another for dominance of the pattern. Neither could win the arcane contest, but the magic stored in that struggle pulsed outward, threatening to stop the durthans heart completely.

Regaining control of herself, she straightened her back and shifted her eyes to the doorway itself. It was not black nor any shade of any color. It was a lack of light, a nothingness that looked back at her with a hungry, dark eye. She sensed the Weave bending and warping through the doorway, but not breaking, only changing as it rippled outward through the Shield and across to the edges of the city. Such was the disturbance she had detected in Shandaular's streets, the curse that had made the City of Weeping Ghosts.

Her arm rose of its own accord. Though she willed the action, the Breath at that moment wielded her as much as she wielded it. Flashes of pain and anger tore through her thoughts, as if a second mind were supplanting her intentions with its own. The Breath, the key to the Word, pierced the black veil and sank into its limitless depth. The steel was swallowed to the hilt, and her fingers brushed against the terrible dark. Countless words, screams, cries, whispers, and deaths flooded her senses, blinding her and leaving her deaf for several moments.

Spots of brightness pocked her vision as it returned. A faltering step echoed in her ears like thunder in the sudden silence. The Breath lay heavy and inert at her side, its prodding and trembling gone. Its point lay upon the floor, though she had no recollection of lowering the sword. The door stood open, its breathtaking darkness now replaced by rusted black iron. Gazing beyond, she stepped forward, the spent Breath dragging behind her, and entered the Word.

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Bastun followed the footsteps of the durthan, past the dead, through churned snow, toward the northwest tower. The unnatural fever lessened a bit, the ring on his finger cooling

as he left Serevan behind him, but it throbbed as he neared the source of Shandaular's woe. Weakness and fatigue clung to the hem of his robes, staggering his step slightly. His legs ached, his injuries screamed for rest, yet the path of Anilya drew him on. He needed to look upon her with eyes that knew what she had done—what she would soon do.

He fell against the door frame, wincing as the ring renewed its aura of heat. He fought the urge to throw off his cloak and cool himself. The death that hid in winter's grip was a trickster, fooling the mind into an irrational fever. Though heat radiated from him and the ring, distorting all he saw through a filter of undulating mirage, he would not risk the dangers of exposure. He contemplated the ring itself, sensing its importance but unsure of its true purpose. It was a secret neither Athumrani nor Arkaius—or even Keffrass—had written of, and he feared bringing it too close to the Word.

Something slippery caught his boot, and he lost his balance, sliding down to his hands. He swore and rose carefully to his feet. Gleaming in the half-light of stars and the burning embers of dying torches, his hands were covered in something dark and sticky. Nearby lay the source. Bent double and surrounded by a pool of blood, the corpse of a Creel shaman had been left tangled within shredded robes. His gray hair was matted to the floor, one dry bone charm crushed into the stones.

Leading away from the scene, with nary a quickened pace nor sign of struggle, were the bloody footprints of his quarry.

Another old man in her path, he thought, cut down and left for dead.

His eyes widened as the air was pulled from his lungs. As he struggled to breathe, the ring flared with energy. Pain shot through his arm, covering his body and causing him to fall upon the steps. Darkness rolled past him from the stairway, devouring sight, breath, and all sense of time or place. His squeezed his eyes shut. Unbearable waves of heat churned

in his gut like molten iron. He feared opening his eyes, afraid to find his hands charred and bleeding, his flesh sizzling and steaming against the icy stone beneath him. He knew, without having to see for himself, that the Breath had been used and the seal upon the Word had been broken.

The dark passed and the pain faded. Air flowed back into his chest, bitingly cold, and his teeth chattered as he opened his eyes. His skin was unharmed. The flames he imagined were invisible, the ash and char only in his mind. He sensed eyes upon him and turned his head toward the top of the next flight of stairs.

She stood quietly, a blank expression on her face. Sorrow had left, leaving only deep emptiness and resignation. Athumrani's daughter stared down upon him with eyes that matched the misery of her cursed existence. Her ghostly brothers and sister swirled around her frantically, though she remained unaffected by their madness. Ashen chains smashed and crumbled against the walls, crawling toward him as slow and shaking tendrils. Staring into her bright eyes, he knew she could see the spark of madness that resided within him. He could not blame her for not stopping her cursed siblings.

As the chains neared, brushing against his fingers, the little girl wavered. Her body shook horribly, blinking in and out of sight. The children wailed as they were drawn into her strange fit, and the shadowy chains receded. With a final glance, he saw in her eyes a hint of hope, a tenuous trust that he could only attribute to her familiarity with the mask he wore. The shadows faded into the walls, soaking into stone and ice until all trace was gone. Taking a deep breath, he crawled upward on hands and knees. He cursed Serevan for the pains he had inflicted upon the children, the Seven of the Firedawn Cycle.

As if summoned, the ancient song flitted through his thoughts, and he wondered at the words that came to mind.

The Nentyarch's son, by sword and curse, to tower-tall he

strides,
At morning light, for Breath and Word, still there his fury came;
Though cold he found among the fire, he mourned forgotten Flame.

Ice melted at his touch as he crawled up the stairs. The walls dripped as he passed and froze again when he was gone. The Firedawn Cycle, the last passages of Shandaular's fall and the beginning of Narfell's epic rise to power and destructive war with Raumathar, sang over and over again in his head. There were many hidden bits of wisdom in the old song, such that even the oldest living othlors did not fully understand them all. Secrets of Rashemen's past were said to be revealed only to those who were ready to know.

The top of the stairs came into view, the flat expanse confusing him for a moment as he reached for the next step. He looked up and beheld the doorway, the arch carved around the opening and the hybrid magic created by King Arkaius. The weapon forged and sealed away lay open, the famed black door now ordinary iron and rust on ancient hinges. Magic alone held them together, ready to be shut again.

He blinked and wheezed for breath. The heat of the strange ring had intensified as he neared the top of the stairs. He knew what lay beyond, and he knew its terrible purpose. The Firedawn Cycle, whether by memory or some subtle magic woven into the words, had revealed one of its secrets.

Weary and determined, he crawled toward the doorway, fighting for each piece of ground he took. Anilya's shadow paced within, and he looked down to the ring on his finger.

It seemed there were indeed three artifacts, forged by a desperate king in service to his people, that had worked to seal Shandaular's fate. The durthan had taken the Breath. She had opened the door to the Word—but he alone had found, and now held possession of, the Flame.

chapter Tujeoty-four

"Jhere were places secreted among the wilds of Rashemen, where those of the wychlaren and their guardians were taken for burial. Occasionally these places were well known as sacred ground devoted to heroes or champions of the land, favored by the spirits that watched well over their rest. Other places, more secluded and visited only by the wychlaren, held those whom destiny had taken too soon. They would lie in wait for those left behind beneath the boughs of ancient trees, their graves marked only by spots of sunlight and leaves disturbed by the wind. It was the peace of such a place to which Thaena found her thoughts drifting.

Dirt filled the lines in her palms, found its way beneath her fingernails. Dreamlike she turned them over, studying the stains of Rashemen's soil, as Duras lay quiet and unmoving before her. The ritual had been instinctual, a simple prayer for the protection of his spirit and the soil to protect his body from the ravages of undeath. Slowly her hands reached for his, to cross them over his chest along with his sword.

Somewhere nearby a terrible roar thundered. Unhallowed voices whispered through the air as a numbing cold drew mist and steam from the throats of the living. She blinked, her eyes dry and sore, and shook her head as she focused on her task.

It is my task, she thought. It is what I can do for him—what I could not do before.

She lifted his left hand. Small and pale, an old scar crossed through his palm, a sign of undying friendship between two young boys torn apart by an untimely death. The death and the funeral thereafter had lived with Ouras ever since, had spilled from him years later and helped forge the bond between ethran and guardian that now ached within her breast. He had never let go, crushed by guilt of the boy he'd been—guilt she could not soothe from his haunted memory.

"What I could not do," she said. "Give him peace."

Something slid across the floor nearby. Shambling footsteps

drew nearer. Blearily she looked up into the face of one of her warriors. His eyes were glazed over, mouth agape and moaning as his awkward gate forced air through his lungs with each lurching step. She blinked again and reality found a place in her thoughts.

Calmly, she completed the ritual. She took up Duras's sword but did not replace it in his hands. Instead she stood and took a cleansing breath. Members of the wychlaren rarely had use for long blades, preferring simple daggers, staves, or their famed whips, but many were trained in the art of swordplay.

Her feet slid gracefully across the stone as she raised the sword against the mindless thing that had replaced the berserker. The power in her slash betrayed the calm demeanor that had overtaken her. The blade sank deep into the undead's neck, and she kicked the weapon free, sending the dead berserker off balance.

It slipped on a patch of frost and fell onto its back, trying to stand and make its newly disjointed shoulder support its weight. She reached into a pouch and sprinkled a pinch of sulfur over the thing as she walked by, whispering a quick incantation. Flames engulfed the thrashing body, bringing fresh light and heat into the chamber. The wraiths recoiled from the sudden illumination, giving Syrolf and those at his back a much-needed moment of distraction.

The fire also drew the attention of the prince. Serevan Crell, half-skeletal and turning to face her with quick, snapping movements, shook off bits of ice as he freed himself of the bleakborn dormancy. He cracked his sword against the stone floor, breaking away frost encrusted on the blade. Half-formed brows knitted in confusion as he stared at her. Standing straight, he called out something she could not understand and the wraiths drew away from their battle, hovering toward him in subservience.

The last of the walking corpses fell to Syrolf s sword, and he stumbled to one knee. The exhaustion that followed a

berserker's fury was debilitating—and in some cases fatal. As the Rashemi warriors heaved for breath and clung to weapons, Thaena summoned another spell and listened carefully as the prince began to speak.

"Captain," he rasped, still staring at the ethran, "tarry no longer with these strange spirits, these tricks of the Magewarden. Secure the central tower and disable the remainder of the Shield's defenses. Send some of your men to help mind the fires in the city."

One of the wraiths nodded, its face disappearing in folds of twisting cloth and dark ether, but its bright eyes focused on the risen prince. The spirits moved to obey, but paused as Serevan continued.

"If any of my father's wizards approaches the citadel, kill them and throw them to the flames as kindling. I will attend to matters here. Now go."

The wraiths drifted away, flowing past Thaena. She stared after them a moment, then watched Serevan pace in a circle, his body still not completely up to the task of mimicking the life he believed he still had. He ignored her and the berserkers as if he were alone. Finally his gaze rested upon the open doors and the northwest tower.

"My father wishes a portal?" he said aloud, his thin lips spreading in a rictus of a grin as he took a step toward the long wall. "Then by all means I shall give him one."

Syrolf stood on shaking legs, supporting himself on his sword to intercept the prince. The others, though injured and weak, followed suit as best they could. Thaena watched all of it in a daze. If not for the loose-fitting armor and bony claws of the prince, she could almost believe that she was the spirit and he the living commander of an invading army. Blood flowed like a cold river of ice through her limbs. An errant breeze blew from outside, stinging her chapped and cracked lips, drying the tracks of spent tears on her cheeks.

She looked down, absently searching for her mask. On the floor, it stared at her from beside Duras's body. Blood

smeared its face—her face, since the wychlaren had accepted her request to lead a fang on a relatively safe mission. She felt disembodied, floating from one heartbeat to the next and seeking a purpose to match the unending drive of the dead prince that had slain her lover.

Staring at his face, a knot of guilt ate at her stomach, and warmth returned for a moment. She dropped the sword, flexing her fingers as she turned away from the body. She felt stripped to the bone, light and drifting on a nightmarish wind as arcane words escaped her. The Weave responded and set power adrift along with her, a building storm to fill the unwelcome void in her chest.

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On hands and knees Bastun crawled into the chamber of the Word, squinting through the haze of power that surrounded him. It roared in his ears, an unfelt wind rushing and turning. Every surface squirmed with Ilythiiri and Nar runes, a shimmering labyrinthine pattern that distorted all he could see. He searched for Anilya through a myriad of dark shapes, most of which seemed only mirage. He pushed farther inside, his presence causing ripples in the torrent running through his fingers and around his legs.

The fever of the Flame only grew stronger, and he allowed it to wash over him. He accepted the pain, felt deserving of it for what he had allowed to happen—what he might still allow.

Holes formed in the walls and floor, shimmering open as if the tower were tearing itself apart. Through these he saw glimpses of Shandaular and the outside world. In some the city lay as dead and ruined as he knew it to be, full of shadows and mist. In others it still burned, an eternal pyre of suffering while Narfell's cruel emissary sought the deadly secrets of King Arkaius. For a moment he wondered which of the two cities truly lay outside the threshold he had just crossed. He felt himself lying on the doorstep of nowhere, in between and hovering in a state of stilled potential—a

superposition from which any possibility could occur.
Movement caught his eye as one of the dark shapes drew closer. Waves of glimmering energy, nearly invisible, rolled and parted before the figure striding toward him. The mask appeared first, darkened eyes regarding him coldly as Anilya approached. She knelt close to him, tilting her head as she studied his weakened state. Blood seeped through his robes from the wound in his side, dripping to the floor and flowing within the runes upon runes beneath him.
The time and distance between them seemed to stretch for eons, brief and enduring, near and far all at once. His every desire rose to the surface of his mind, and he found it difficult to remain focused in the strange nexus of what was still a dormant magic. He imagined his hands caressing her shoulders, drawing her close—then her face, contorted in agony as he choked the life from her. He screamed and whispered, felt unimaginable peace and exultant anger all in the space of a few moments. The Word enveloped them in its vortex of chaos. To Bastun it seemed this was the space that existed between thought and action, the heartbeat between will and the spell it summoned.
"You mean to stop me, vremyonni?" Anilya's voice carried throughout the chamber, echoed and reverberated into a nonsense that was drowned out by the power of the Word.
He could not form an answer, each breath focused on penetrating the burning aura that boiled inside of him. Sweat soaked his robes and matted his hair to his neck and mask. His bleeding was getting worse with each pounding heartbeat, and his throat was so dry that a simple skin of water would seem a blessing from the gods. He simply stared at the durthan, struggling to breathe and to maintain his focus.
"I thought not," she said, and removed her mask. She rubbed at her eyes before returning her attention to the mazelike patterns on the floor. "Though I suspect you shall be less than helpful in unraveling the secret of this puzzle,

eh?"
Puzzle to you, he thought. Nightmare to me.
She strolled, searching the runes for the pattern's beginning. Tiny motes of light drifted from her fingertips and struck the floor. Bursts of energy illuminated entire sections of the engraved spellwork. More holes appeared, more ripples and tides of distortion, but little else. Within the disturbance, Bastun caught a glimpse of metal shining through the miasma. He stared at the spot, torn between thoughts of vengeance and any hope of saving those he left behind with Serevan. In the end, both were victorious as he crawled closer to the source of his dread.
Keffrass had told him, warned him, about this moment, though he could never have known what the choice would be—or where it would be made.
"You"—he tried to speak and coughed violently, tasting blood and morbidly thankful for the moisture it brought to his lips as he continued. "You mean to go through with this?"
"Well, it would be an awful waste if I did not," she said, pacing from one series of symbols to the next, narrowing her search with painstaking precision.
He kept note of her position, a blot of wavering shadow to his right, as he pulled himself across the floor. She continued speaking and he saw her voice more than he heard it, the sound vibrating on the air around him.
"A waste, especially, of time. Over two thousand years of secrecy and unrest. The wychlaren actually thought they could hold all of this in check."
Closer now to the shining flash of steel that drew him on, Bastun suspected that time had beaten him as well. He could not know how long he had truly been inside the chamber. The unstable nature of the magic King Arkaius had wrought eroded the accuracy of his senses. Steam rose from his body as he crawled, the heat further damaging his ability to think clearly. Somewhere nearby Anilya still spoke, though he could only hear the discordant aftereffects of her

words, a gibberish that helped him to maintain, kept him going.
With each gain of distance he felt time slipping through his fingers, like tiny threads being severed. He felt himself being undone, torn apart and burned alive, made ready for what was to come. There could be no regrets, no sorrow of the Magewarden, no guilt or hesitation. The thing he sought to touch understood few things about mortals and emotion, but it knew weakness and pain—and it knew hunger; it knew revenge.
It would devour any indecision, any soft thought, and destroy Shandaular anew.
Arcs of bright energy sped beneath him, Nar runes glowing an angry green while the more dominant Ilythiiri symbols radiated an aura of blackness. The light burned his eyes even as another swath of the pattern writhed and fell away, revealing a window on the dying city outside. Throngs of people ran through the streets, trying to escape the swords of the Nentyarch's soldiers. Ash and flame showered the crowded masses, cut down in splashes of violence as a massive plume of curling smoke rose from where the portal had been. Arkaius had saved as many as he could and many had escaped the fate of Shandaular, but he could not save them all and his sacrifice was not suffered by him alone.
"That is the history that will become Rashemen's future."
Anilya stood a few paces away as the window faded back to stone. Bastun pushed himself up to sit on his knees. His head swam as he looked toward the durthan, his arms limp at his sides, though the bright edge of a simple pommel lay shimmering but an arm's span away. Through half-lidded eyes he watched Anilya pace, the first signs of frustration on her face as she examined more of the patterns. The room's vortex surrounded them at the center of the chamber.
"Overrun by its enemies," Anilya continued, "left to rot. Spent and useless. Created by cowardice to stand only as piles of stone, ash, and ruin."

She turned, waving her hands over another stretch of the floor, each step leading her closer to the center of the pattern. Bastun leaned forward, stretching to reach the handle of the sword. His fingertips brushed the pommel, and his breath was stolen as Athumrani's spirit grasped at his hand. He fought the Magewarden's spirit, forcing the ghost's will to obey his own. The leather-wrapped handle was cold to the touch, a respite from the fever of the cursed ring.

As he pulled on the Breath, its blade scraped against the floor, a hollow screech of steel that disrupted the vortex of the chamber. He heard the durthan pause her low chanting and turn to face him. Fear gave him the energy he needed to lift the weapon and cradle it in his arms.

Anilya smiled, though a cruel amusement played through her eyes at what she saw. "A sword, is it? Shall you run me through? Is this what you came for?" Incredulous laughter hid behind each syllable. "You should have killed me when you had the chance—and the strength—to do so."

He could not defeat her. He knew as much long before entering the Word, had contemplated the moment she would be successful in reaching it. A part of him always knew it would come to this, and that part frightened him more than the Word itself.

The spell he needed drifted and slid through a haze of pain in his mind. The words, the gestures came slowly, bit by bit. He struggled to ignore the screaming sorrow of Athumrani, the dull ache of his bleeding wound, and the pain of each rattling breath he forced into his lungs. The strength he needed was there—scattered and hiding throughout his body, but there.

Forcing his eyes to remain open, he watched as if in a dream as shadows gathered behind the durthan. They separated and settled, forming blobs of shifting and blurry darkness, though one appeared as she had in life. The Magewarden's daughter—her name unspoken in Athumrani's ravings, lost to time—did not truly look upon him, but he imagined that

she saw him through the image of her father. Her lip trembled, her eyes begged him to stop, and he felt his strength wane.
"Forgive me," he said, and the words were his own, not the father lost to sorrow and unreason.
The children faded as he focused on Anilya, saw in her the last fragment of strength he desired. He gathered it to him—all the anger and guilt, to be done with it and court freedom, to spend it all on one choice. On the edge of his own abyss, to stop his enemy, he must grant her desire.
"Forgive?" Anilya said, confused, and her eyes widened as he reversed his grip on the Breath, the blade angling down, point-first toward the floor. She raised her hands, her voice chanting the first syllables of a killing spell, but Bastun was more prepared.
The magic leaped from his hand, a simple incantation, but effective. An airy orb surged forward, thrumming loudly and striking Anilya in the chest. She fell backward, her own spell lost in the discordant sound as she slammed to the floor.
Bastun did not look down, the exact placement of the blade unimportant. Instead he kept his gaze fully on the durthan, his master's murderer. He fed on the anger that welled in him, grasped it and pushed on the sword, pressing it deep into the
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stone. The floor shook, and a terrible chill flooded through his hands. His fever was banished, the burning of the ring balanced by an unimaginable freezing.
Somewhere in the vast reaches of ice that appeared in his mind's eye, a consciousness stirred. Dull and slowed by centuries of cold, it reached for him and caressed his soul with a limitless evil.
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Bright spots danced at the edges of Thaena's vision, exhaustion's harbingers stabbing through her skull. She kept her balance despite all, staggering away from the

hungry frost of the dead prince. Her spells—those that might have any effect at all upon the bleakborn—were nearly spent, and Serevan still stood, still stared at her as his face returned to a semblance of life. Syrolf and two others remained standing, their brethren on the ground breathing but unable to go on.

Thaena's hands curled into fists as the prince studied her. He squinted as if she were barely there, a figment of his imagination. He had defended himself with the same nonchalant grace, dismembering most of her magic and weathering the rest without a wound to show for her efforts. Syrolf and the others charged him, slashing and cutting before retreating from his feeding aura, yet his flesh only flushed at their efforts. Scars faded and pale skin grew anew. Despite the futility of the assault Syrolf would go back, again and again, urging his men on for the memory of fallen Duras—to keep the prince from the northwest tower.

As the runescarred berserker raised his blade and prepared to attack again, Serevan's expression changed. A wave of rippling force left his palm, laying the berserkers flat and sliding them against the far wall.

"Enough," he said calmly, tilting his head as he stared at Thaena.

She endured the icy gaze, glancing away once to see that Syrolf was still conscious and trying to rise. Serevan shook his head, sheathing his sword and staring at the floor and walls as if with new eyes. He stumbled briefly, unbalanced, and Thaena nudged the blade of a dropped sword with her boot.

"This—this is not a trick... Athumrani. Wh-what has he done?"

Slowly kneeling to retrieve the sword, Thaena paused as the prince's body wavered, a double image flickering in and out around him. The double's mouth was silently screaming, its face contorted in pain before falling away and disappearing. It left Serevan staggering, dropping to one knee. The pale

light from outside, that first dim glow of dawn, faded away, overtaken by a renewed darkness. Night returned as all wind stopped, the air frozen, and Thaena felt herself stilled.
She had never in her life experienced such a profound quiet and sickening dread, as if all creation would topple at the resounding echo of a single heartbeat. She started as the first cries came from beyond the walls, growing into a chorus of wailing and weeping voices. The last remaining torches guttered out. Panic rose in her chest, overcoming reason as she took up the sword and rushed the incapacitated prince.
He looked up, eyes clear, seeing her plainly for the first time. The thrust of her strike forced itself through air thickened by a pervasive and malevolent chill. The blade met his outstretched hand, stabbing through his palm, grating against the metal guard on the edge of his gaundet. She sobbed as she pushed, grief and anger powering the tip of the sword into his breastplate. It screeched to a stop, half a hand's length through the armor. Serevan made no sound, gave no indication of pain as he stood and regarded her.
The open fingers of his pierced hand closed tightly on the blade. Crystals of ice formed on the steel, rushing down to her hands and feeding at what felt like her last reserves
of energy. She tried to scream, to give voice to the chaos of emotion that had replaced her insides. Naught escaped her save a raspy whisper of choking breath.
"No," was all that he said as she felt her legs grow weak.
He shoved on the blade. The pommel struck her chin and she swooned, the sword pulling free as she fell back in a daze. SyrolPs arms caught her, pulling her away from the bleakborn.
Serevan stared thoughtfully at the pair, then at the closing wound in his palm. "The Word opens again, and death does not come for his pittance."
He turned on his heel and strode for the open doors, tattered cloak billowing behind him.
Thaena lunged, sword in hand, after the prince, but Syrolf

held her back.
"Forgive me, ethran," he said weakly, "but we have done all we can. The Shield will not let him die easily... and we are in no condition to explore the limits of that strength."
She did not struggle long against his grip, slumping on her knees as the voices of the dead sang a distant dirge of despair. Her half-lidded gaze sought some spark of light from the world outside, a link to the natural order of things. She found nothing but the dying embers of a steaming torch. She lost herself in its glow, alone at the end of all things.
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chapter Tujer)tu-Fiue
'Xhe floor fell away, stone fracturing and splitting to reveal an expanse of indiscernible shapes and infinite pits. Otherworldly winds blasted Bastun's body, a forceful gale in contrast to the stillness of the Breath and the feel of solid ground beneath him. He crashed through glassy barriers, plummeting, shattering the veils between reality and those realms that lay in wait on the other side. Glimpses of passing things caught his eye, shifting and scurrying through dark corridors, seeking holes through which they might crawl into mortal worlds and minds. Other visions came as well, more immediate to his concerns, fleeting and misleading, showing him times that were and those that could be.
He saw Thaena, beaten and weak, her eyes dull and lifeless, as Syrolf held her amidst the remnants of her fang. She looked upon the retreating form of Serevan and the darkness that had taken hold of the world outside the Word. The prince gazed out with awakened eyes upon the ruins of Shandaular and the quieted walls of the Shield. In a blink these visions were replaced, over and over again, each more horrible than the last as Bastun descended further into a deeper cold. Every muscle in his body tensed at the growing power that pulsed through the Breath, yet he fought to hang on to the only solid object that existed.
Legions of beasts populated the blurring places and

corridors that flew by. Some turned, catching his eye, watching him disinterestedly before returning to tasks of flame and iron. Fiends of horns and leather wings, claws and needlelike teeth, thrashed against the transparent walls of the tower. He could still feel the Shield around him, the enclosed space, the smell of stale ait, and the magic of ancient runes humming in his ears.

The monsters, appearing and disappearing with a scratch of hungry claws, did not disturb him so much as those few that looked as human as himself. Something in their flashing eyes made him look away, afraid to see the corrupted souls behind their cruel and dispassionate stares.

Bursts of lightning surrounded him as he was engulfed by a blanket of swiftly moving clouds. He closed his eyes against the brightness, thunder pounding and shaking his bones with each strike. Motes of pain danced across his knuckles, and it seemed as though they might split, such was his hold on the Breath. The unnatural storm grew more intense. There were no breaks between the lightning and thunder, both existing as one in the wind and stinging rain of ice that stung his flesh and tapped against the surface of his mask. The chaos threatened to tear him away from his anchor, send him spinning into a nowhere that had no place for sentient beings or coherent thoughts. He screamed, trying to force one small note of something into the maelstrom of nothing.

At the end of his breath he inhaled, and everything stopped. Silence slammed into being, leaving a deafening ringing in his ears. Cracking open his eyes, he found himself kneeling. The Breath was before him, still in his unceasing grip, yet now its blade lay buried in ice, not stone. A twilit sky lay at the distant horizon of a vast ocean of ice and jagged peaks. Lightning danced across the sky, so high above that its thunder no longer had a voice with which to reach him. He exhaled a long breath of steam, eyes widening, hands aching, as he prepared for what was to come next.

This was the end. The destination that had been a hair's breadth away from everything he knew, yet all the forces of reality and nature kept them apart. One of many planes of existence, it had waited for him in that narrowing space between the Breath and the Word—a frozen hell known as Stygia.

The very air felt alive, circling him and studying this mortal that dared tread upon unhallowed ground. The ground shook as the mystic nature of Stygia began to gather around the Breath. The sword trembled, and ice formed within its ancient runes, crawling up to his hands. It began as a slight tingle in his fingers, cold and volatile, searching and almost curious. The sudden flood of power that followed nearly broke his determined grasp.

It pooled in his gut, rose, and sloshed through his chest in icy waves of pure energy. His skull filled with burning, he bore down on the Breath. The pain electrified every fiber of his being, but he kept control.

The spirit of Athumrani, so long bound to the ancient sword, fell away in that first jolt of power.

The memory of the Magewarden's death, swift and violent, tore him open, releasing the gathered power of Stygia across the whole of Shandaular. The fires had snuffed out. Soldiers and commoners alike had been slain. The Word had opened and, in the instant before closing, it consumed Athumrani's life and laid waste to the city it was meant to defend.

The memory of the grieving father's death left a taste of ashes and copper in Bastun's mouth, but unlike Athumrani he did not bring sorrow with him to place upon a frozen altar in an uncaring hell. Stygia devoured sorrow, ripped away love and compassion.

Bastun imagined himself a vessel. He allowed the power to tear through his body and spirit. Long jagged wounds opened and closed in his skin as he pulled the power into himself, denying it entrance to the world. Each rip brought tears to his eyes, yet focused them, sharpening his vision as

he spent his
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rage. Slowly, the cold reseating of his skin became less painful and more numb. Stygia accepted the currency he had brought, though he wondered what he had purchased in return.
Several strides away, on the edge of the ice, the durthan stirred beside the black waters of the Stygian ocean. From the limitless depths of that dark sea, he sensed the attention of an ancient mind and felt its touch flow through the rush of power in his body. Malicious thoughts marched along his arms like an army of needles.
The reasonless tempest of Stygia's power became a living thing as evil caressed and crushed all at once. It whispered loving words in his ears, crooning and cajoling him to release his control, to open the doors of his willpower and loose hell upon a world that had no use for him. It shouted and screamed, the thunderous voice echoing as if submerged, tearing at the insides of his flesh in frustration to free itself.
He could see it, buried somewhere in the ocean's dark—a glacier bearing a dark blot of the prisoner within: Stygia's frozen devil-prince, Levistus.
The ice shook and cracked around him, geysers of water bursting from beneath. White faces of the damned sobbed and screamed from within the shifting blocks. Anilya rose on her hands and knees, crawling away from the rising waves of the ocean.
Despite pain and the croonings of that evil, Bastun held back the tide that swelled to break him.
This had been the failing of Arkaius. The long-unanswered covenant he had forged in Ilythiiri runes had been too much for Shandaular's king. His desire to save his people had driven him to desperate measures, pitting devils against the Nentyarch's demons. In the end he had turned away from the call of that dark mind in the depths, horrified by what he

had created.
Bastun knelt alone on that precarious perch, resisting the weaknesses of his own humanity in order to hold the edges
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of the Word intact for those he left behind. The power that Arkaius had denied, Bastun reluctantly accepted.
He felt a measure of control transferred to him as strength flooded through his arms and legs. The wound.in his side disappeared. His aches and pains fell away. Spent rage left him hollow, and he sensed the sighing approval of Stygia and its hidden lord. With a strained thought he willed the ice to stop its quaking, and an ominous stillness settled uncomfortably within him.
Anilya approached slowly, shaking with cold, though Bastun sensed little more than a cool, gentle breeze. He looked up, coursing with a torrent of borrowed power, and only faintly felt the desire for vengeance. All doubt and things unnecessary, emotions that could unbalance his control, he made a space for them within. She had chosen her path, and he would make sure only she suffered for that choice.
"You killed him," he said, voice low and growling, amplified into an inhuman sound that grated in his ears. The last memory of his master's face, dying in the snow, flashed through his mind.
Anilya looked at him in fear, then over her shoulder at the nightmarish landscape that surrounded them both.
"You opened the Word, vremyonni," she said, straining to breathe the cold air. "Do not accuse me of trifles like murder!"
The durthan lunged, dark flames spitting from her hands as she sought to take hold of the Breath. The spell licked painfully at his hands and arms, hissing where it touched the buried blade. He stared curiously at the effect as if outside of himself. Anilya pulled and scratched at his fingers, finding them as hard and immovable as stone. The shadowy flames disappeared, leaving bits of his skin brittle and

peeling, blackened and steaming. Looking into the durthans crazed eyes, he watched her confidence waver and fade to fear.
"What's wrong?" he asked. "I thought this was what you wanted."
Force gathered around him, and he willed it outward, watching as Anilya was slammed backward. Her body flew through the air and crashed against a spire of ice, then slid to the ground. The sound of breaking bone echoed, the reverberations tingling across his skin.
As he witnessed the violent effects of a mere whim, he wondered what he had done to himself. The swirling power clenched on his innards, twisting and stretching as it sensed the presence of his doubt. Gasping in pain, he pushed away his brief fear and breathed heavily as the pain subsided.
Anilya coughed, blood staining her lips as she pushed herself to a sitting position. She cradled a broken arm and one leg was bent at an unnatural angle. In the distance Bastun could see shapes diving and winging through the clouds. Black feathered wings bore tiny figures ever closer. Waves rolled in the ocean as beasts rose to the surface, spiny backs breaking the water before submerging again. Wiping her mouth on het sleeve, Anilya turned and saw them as well.
"They're coming for you," he said, shaking with the strain of maintaining the caged chaos that flowed from the Breath.
"So it seems," she replied, shifting her shoulders and looking away from the awakening denizens of Stygia, "though I suspect they'll have an eye for you as well." She shook with cold, frost forming in patches on her face and arms. "We could leave together, use this power for the greater good."
"I told you once before," he said. "Your passion lacks sincerity—and there is no good in this."
Pale arms, encrusted with ice, broke the ocean's surface and gripped the edges of the small island. Humanoid bodies, their faces frozen in grotesque expressions, pulled

themselves sluggishly onto solid ground, flopping and sliding as they piled over one another. Dark angels, screeching hideous dirges overhead, circled and cast black eyes onto the procession of the damned.

Slowly, Bastun turned his head downward, unable to look upon the foul souls as they sought purchase on the ice. The slight weakness pained him, but the unnatural strength did not fade. The power did not so quickly punish this flaring spark of humanity. Claws scraped and drew his attention to the left where he spied a serpentine monstrosity writhing over a distant block of ice. Its pale blue eyes met his and he found a part of himself hiding in its multifaceted gaze. He shuddered, and the pain grew a bit more, but subsided more swiftly as if the power of Stygia were reshaping each lapse to its own design.

"Don't look away, Bastun," Anilya said hoarsely, and he looked at her blue-tinged lips, frozen droplets of blood clinging to her chin. "Remember this. Remember all of it."

The first of the condemned souls grasped her ankle, and she winced as her injured leg was tugged. Try as he might, he could not look away, could not abandon the need to see the fate of his friends' murderer. He whispered under his breath, in equal parts praying to the Three and recounting all that had brought him to this moment, this choice, this grim acceptance.

Anilya had not the strength to scream or cry out, but the damned did it for her as they pulled her inexorably to the ocean. Bastun heard in their voices a lament for their own existence, the dim memories of lives and deaths and torments suffered. He realized the curse of Shandaular and its Shield was birthed in the depths of this place, in the unceasing repetition of a frozen hell. Its power rushed in his ears, leaving him numb as a tangled mass of limbs and faces engulfed the durthan.

"Remember it, vremyonni!" she called out. "Remember the power! Rashemen may yet have need of it!"

The first splashes of falling bodies broke the water, and she was gone, the voices of her captors gone with her. In a daze, Bastun lowered his eyes and stared at the hilt of the Breath, studied the strange hands, his own fingers wrapped tightly around this fulcrum between worlds.

"It is done," he muttered, and yet he knew it could not be true, briefly imagining having to repeat the words every morning for eternity. The thought broke through the separation between

will and flesh, and he pulled at the blade. Ice cracked and split as the sword shifted. The runes along the Breath flared, and he felt the walls he had built around his humanity begin to crumble. Pain flared behind his eyes, and he tugged harder, his new strength breaking the magic's grip. The walls of the Shield flickered around him, indistinct and transparent.

He rose and braced his feet on either side of the embedded Breath, straining and staring into the storm-laced skies above. Dark-winged angels, fiendish minions of Levistus, dived from their heights and fixed him in their black-eyed stares. The Breath glowed with a brilliant white light, and it felt as though he were tearing a limb from his body as the blade began to slide free from the clinging ice.

Flashes of darkness, stone, and lightning danced before his eyes. Black wings surrounded him, enveloped him in soft, downy feathers that reeked of perfume and death. Scarlet lips whispered in his ears, promising unimaginable pleasures and ancient secrets.

He fell away, tumbling backward as if struck. A cold stone floor arrested his fall. The Breath clattered and clanged as his arms fell out to his sides. Ilythiiri runes squirmed in the ceiling above, their magic fading once again into dormancy. They settled back into their patterns, entwined inside the knotwork of the Word's symbols. Bastun's head rolled from side to side. He stared at the walls and the mirage of power that swirled through the chamber.

Sitting up he raised the Breath before him, its once simple blade now filled with an unholy power. He stood carefully, looking upon the Word and the Breath with new eyes. It was more than a mere portal or gate; its influence still curled and swam through his body. Closing his eyes he felt something new. Reaching out with his thoughts he could sense the high walls of the tower, each stone in its foundation, every open door and errant breeze as if the Shield were an extension of himself.

The eastern walls, mostly a shell now as their interiors had crumbled long ago, warmed slightly as the first gray light of a winters dawn tried to penetrate Shandaular's mists. Much closer though, he could sense another presence on the Shield's walls.

Bastun's body moved with a preternatural strength and balance despite the mess of his thoughts. Part of his mind focused on descending the stairs, keeping alert, and finishing what he had begun—what had begun long ago. The rest of him felt a mess, a jumble of emotions, questions, and doubts. His cheeks were cold, a few tears freezing before they could roll away, but he could not determine for whom they fell.

Ghosts flitted by as time rolled in random directions around him. The memories of the Shield were his memories, though the details were fleeting as if the stone were alive and forgetting things as it aged. The past was all that remained, the only life left for the crumbling fortress to live. There was a kinship between he and the Shield that he was loathe to admit, but he could not deny it.

He recalled his first arrival at the gates, staring at the high towers and walls. He had been so eager to get inside and see for himself this place he had known in tome and scroll. Now, he only wished to escape. He had forged his peace, with KefTrass and himself, in blood and in ice, and had buried pain and regret in the deepest hell he could find.

The length of the walls and the various towers of the Shield

spread out before him, and he found himself outside. Predawn light lit the eastern sky, glowing across the ocean of mist that rolled and eddied just below the battlements. Leaning on those crenellations, staring out across the ruin of Shandaular, stood the youngest son of the Nentyarch.

Serevan, his faced half-ruined with flesh slowly creeping backward into death's grimace, did not turn at Bastun's arrival. The prince looked upon a city that was not burning, not dying, but dead, a cursed shell of the city he remembered.

"Time is broken," Serevan muttered as Bastun approached. "The empire is gone. My father is gone."

Bastun paused at the prince's words, keeping the Breath before him as he eyed Serevan.

"You know this?" he asked, his voice resounding with the same power it had taken in Stygia. It echoed and vibrated through the wall, and the prince turned. Pale brows furrowed over the icy, lidless eyes.

"Yes, wizard," he rasped. "I have always been aware of time's passage. Trapped in my own mind, forced to relive the past, to witness my own foolishness. An eternal nightmare, a dream from which I cannot awaken."

Silhouetted by glowing mist, he turned away from the battlements and stared up to the top of the northwest tower, the cradle of the Word. Behind him, Bastun could only see darkness within the watchtower where he had left Thaena and Syrolf. No sound came from within. The pang of alarm he felt became a chill down his spine. He tilted his head at the odd sensation and regarded the cold prince thoughtfully.

"You opened it," Serevan said, still gazing upon the weathered stone of the tower. He did not ask, merely stated a fact that both of them knew, could feel in their bones. "Athumrani sought vengeance when he betrayed me and sacrificed himself. He found it. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation, then reconsidered the

question. His own past, his own ghosts, were quiet within him. The tetrible weight of life on his shoulders had lessened, and the future seemed less an escape than the freedom he had sought. A dull ache tested in his knuckles, the gleaming blade of the Breath still in his hand. The sword, so heavy before, was nothing to the strength he felt now. Something of Stygia's touch remained, hiding beneath his skin, and he found a hint of regret slipping amidst his scattered thoughts. "And... no."

"Hmph. Sacrifice, the purest currency between devils and men," said the prince, and he gazed upon Bastun through orbs of ice in hollowed sockets, his rictus grin growing as the ravages of undeath reclaimed flesh and separated it from illusion. "One never truly knows the price until it is paid."

Bastun was never more aware of his own heartbeat than at that moment, staring into the ruined face of Serevan Crell, pondering the meaning of sacrifice and its price. Faint wisps of steam escaped from around the edges of Bastun's mask, and he breathed a little deeper. His pulse quickened as the air between them grew thick, whatever strange truce that had caused them to speak to one another ending as quickly as it had begun. The prince edged his body sideways in a fighting stance, his tattered cloak and white hair stirred in a morning breeze.

"We must end this here, wizard," Serevan said, his voice now more hollow than before, rumbling out from a withering throat. He drew his thin blade, joints cracking with frozen flesh. "I want what I came for."

Bastun stepped back, raising the Breath.

"You still mean to have this?" he asked, staring from the sword to the bleakborn. "After all that you have seen?"

"I see the world that is and the world that was," the prince replied, glancing once again at the weathered stone and mist-covered landscape of the city. "I cannot deny the fate that was handed to me—but truth be told, I much prefer the dream."

The thin blade darted quickly and Bastun parried. It came again and again, each slash ringing strident tones on the Breath as Bastun backstepped. He had fought this battle before and lost, the memory of the wound in his side still painful, though nary a scar now remained. His breathing came quicker; his pulse raced. Magic seemed slippery and evasive, his thoughts turning to chaos as ghosts flitted past.

They turned, and Bastun was pushed away from the northwest tower, away from the Word and the lingering echoes of its frozen hell. Though the prince continued to deteriorate, the vremyonni could find no opening, could not focus to summon
a spell. He growled in frustration, the unnatural strength flowing through him finding purpose, and he pushed back.

His strikes were poorly timed, but Serevan moved back all the same. The Weave stirred around Bastun, and he sought its thythm as the Breath moved faster. He battered at the thin, dancing blade of the prince. The phantom scents of smoke and blood stitred him even further. Magic remained elusive, but his thoughts had cleared enough to watch the quick sword and the angle of the following thrust.

Bastun's open hand shot out, grasping the prince's sword. The searing pain in his palm was rewarded by a hiss of anger from the bleakborn. Serevan tugged the blade, drawing into bone, but still Bastun held. He imagined he could snap the weapon like a twig, but the Breath shot forward instead. It tore through the bleakborn's breastplate, scraping against ribs and exiting from his back.

Serevan's struggles stopped, and he stared at the sword inside of him. The gleaming blade dulled as its strange glow spread through the bleakborn's body. Ice formed in clumps, and the prince jerked in pain. Bastun could only stare in wonder as the Breath froze what life remained in the undead prince. Bones cracked under the pressure of newly forming ice, brittle hair split and fell away. The taste of ashes filled Bastun's mouth as Serevan's body deteriorated into a

collection of brittle bones. The ancient sword's metal lost its hellborn luster, fading back to runes and small patches of rust and age.
The prince's eyes of ice looked blearily up at the vremyonni, the odd light within them flickering. He raised a skeletal hand held together only by ice and frost. His face was little more than a skull bearing the memory of flesh.
"I much prefer the dream," said a spectral voice from within the destroyed visage, followed by a dry laughter like autumn leaves in a strong wind.
The body slipped backward, falling free of the Breath, and broke as it met the wall. Though the body lay dismembered and
silent, Bastun chanted, summoning the Weave to his will. He shouted, the force of the spell shattering Serevan's remains into motes of ice and fragments of bone. Gray light washed over his shoulder, and a strong breeze scattered the prince, stirring up a snowy dust that swirled on the air before drifting away.
Serevan's words haunted him as he turned in a daze to the watchtower. He slid the Breath into his belt as he approached the doorway, preparing himself for the death that surely lay within. Inside, his eyes adjusting to the dark, he found Duras in the place where he'd left him. Nearby, leaning against the wall in SyrolPs arms, lay Thaena, still and silent but for the slight rising and falling of her breast. Five of the berserkers still lived, injured and solemn, waiting with their ethran. Less than a handful of the others still stirred, lying on the floor in pain or shivering with cold.
The dim morning light grew brighter, the sun's heat causing the mists outside to shift and grow thicker. Bastun turned back to the wall, walking into the blanket of mist, and leaned against the battlements. His hands found the deep impressions where Serevan's palms had been, and he stared out into the shadows and phantoms of Shandaular.
"Is it over?" he heard the ethran whisper, her voice echoing

from within the tower's all-consuming quiet. "Is it ended?"
"It is ended, ethran," said Syrolf. "It is done."
The pale light of ghostly flames drew Bastun's attention to the western gates of the city. Plumes of black smoke mingled with the mists as the memory of screams and wailing cries reached his sensitive ears. Ghosts began again their ritual—the flames, the demons, the children, their chains, and the armies of a misguided prince. Bastun pitied them, understanding the plight of being slave to an inescapable past, but he was now free and those chains would no longer hold him.
"It is truly a new day," he said under his breath.
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now fell softly from gray skies brightened by morning's light. The day ushered in a silence that could be felt and seen around every corner, down every stairway, and hiding amidst the towering heights of each tower. It was a waiting quiet, a brief respite from the play that would erupt shortly after sundown. Even in its dormancy, Bastun could sense the strange vibrations of the Weave in Shandaular. The ability to see and feel so much that should be invisible worried him.
He found if he concentrated well enough, he could ignore the haunting memories of the Shield. The images came and went so fast they wete giving him headaches and he was grateful to be free of the barrage. Faces had appeared that he recognized as if familiar, though he could not recall the names. The cutsed walls of the Shield did not deal in names or identity, only visions and voices, fractured moments of daily life. There was much he could study and learn here, much that he felt compelled to do, but his curiosity could wait awhile longer.
He kept his hood pulled low, frightened that the places and things he had seen would be there for all to see in his stare. He touched the edges of his mask from time to time, making

sure he was concealed, that no one could witness the hell that had stained him so.

With Thaena at their lead, the group set out from the Shield and into the empty streets of Shandaular. None looked back, tradition and superstition keeping them focused on the road ahead and keeping the smordanya at their backs.

Every moment passed as an eternity. Bastun gazed at the sky, guessing at the sun's position and calculating the daylight left before nightfall. Through it all, the others avoided him. He was isolated as before, but now the reasons seemed to have changed. When he caught the odd stare or two, they looked upon him with the respect given to those that wore the masks of Rashemen, of wychlaren and vremyonni. No one asked him what had occurred in the northwest tower. None whispered or repeated old rumors. They saw in him the vyrrdi, the mystery, and did not question his manner or his silence.

The feeling was uncomfortable and strange, causing him to retreat further into his deep hood. Somewhere inside, there was a sense of accomplishment and of completion that flickered to life. This too he was unused to dealing with, and he ignored it for the moment, content to assist and work against the marching armies of time that he sensed growing closer and closer despite the hours left until sunset.

Snow-covered lanes slowed progress to the docks where the Rashemi felucca had been tied. Bastun breathed deep of the outside air, looking more closely at his surroundings, seeing them for the first time in the relative light of day. The cold did not bother him in the slightest. The Flame, the ring that had protected him from Serevan's hunger and Stygia's chill still warmed him, though its effect had lessened considerably. He was grateful for the comfort but felt an odd twinge of concern at the thought of removing the ring. He clenched his fist around it, curious, but patient.

Sheets of ice across Lake Ashane gleamed a pure white, bobbing slightly, though the day would soon come when the

lake's surface would move very little. The northern winter had begun, and the tendays ahead would make them look back on
fitful storms and blizzards with longing for such balmy times.
The felucca was as they'd left it, securely tied, sails stowed and ready to be unfurled. Bastun stared at the hazy horizon, imagining the forests at the water's edge and searching himself for any longing to return, any sense of unfulfilled obligation he might have overlooked in his haste to leave his old life behind.
Nothing. There was nothing calling him, nothing awaiting him. Beautiful though Rashemen might be, and numerous the memories he had made there, it was not enough.
He and Thaena stood side by side as the dead were carefully loaded onto the felucca. The number of men onboard would be doubled since their landing here, but the bodies could not complain of cramped quarters, would not call for jhuild or water, had no need to walk on deck staring out across an expanse of floating ice. The few survivors would drink for them and sing songs of battle, glorious epics and dirges to please the spirits of the Ashane. And they would look upon the lake and the sky, the world around them, with eyes for the dead, their brethren fallen that they might live to fight another day.
Bastun whispered a spell, raising the body of Duras into the air. The berserkers made way, solemnly watching as their former leader was gently laid at the bow, his head forward such that he would be the first to have returned to his homeland when the ship made landfall. Thaena made to follow, and Bastun touched her arm, anticipating this moment, though whatever prepared words he might have had were lost in view of her tear-filled eyes.
"I'm not going back with you. I will stay here... for a time, before moving on," he said, shifting his hood so that he could see the edge of her shoulder.

"I assumed as much," she said, hesitantly, mastering her voice past the grief lodged in her throat. "I do not fully understand all of what happened here, but I know we were—I was
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Bastun said nothing, only nodded slightly as she turned to look over his shoulder. The Shield was invisible from where they stood, hidden as it should be amid the mist and ruin of the dead city. He recognized that silent stare, having no need to see the familiar face beneath her mask to know the regret she felt.
"Keffrass told me many things I thought I had forgotten over the years," he said, just loud enough for her to hear. "But occasionally, at certain random moments, I recall the greatest of wisdom in the simplest of memories."
She turned, listening as he continued.
"The finer points of magic were difficult for me at first, learning among the vremyonni as a child. I was so full of anger all the time, homesick and lost. Finding the focus needed to manipulate the Weave took more effort and patience than I had." He smiled slightly behind his mask. "With one of my first spells I injured a raven by accident, and the bird's pain drove me to teats. I swore I would never use magic again."
He turned toward Thaena, smile fading, eyes shadowed within his hood and narrowing as he made his point.
"But Keffrass sat me down, calmed me, and said, 'It is not what you have done that matters, it is what you will do that counts.' "
Thaena looked away slowly, staring at the northern horizon for long moments. Hidden by mist and distance lay the Firward Mountains and beyond that Erech Forest. Somewhere in that distance, many believed, lay the dark meeting places of the durthan sisterhood. Bastun feared for his friend, feared that Anilya's voice, in spite of all that had happened, had not yet been quieted for either of them.

"And the raven?" she asked.
"I mended its wing as best I could," he answered. "One day it flew away, and I never saw it again."
The ethran nodded, folding her hands before her as she made to leave.
"Farewell, Bastun," she said. "The Land will miss you, as shall I."
He watched her walk the long dock slowly, the remaining Ice Wolves waiting to assist her boarding, when a dim shadow fell over his shoulder. He turned to find Syrolf behind him, the warriors stealth surprising him. The runescarred face stared him down for several moments, expressionless, though a well-hidden grief could be seen in the redness just around his eyes. He said nothing, but finally raised an eyebrow and managed what may have passed for a brief smile as he clapped Bastun soundly on the shoulder and shook him as one might a fellow berserker after a long battle.
Wordlessly, his hand slid away and he followed his ethran to the felucca and assisted with the unfurling of the sails.
Bastun stood on the shore, snow gathering on his shoulders and around the hem of his robes as he watched the vessel and his countrymen push off into the Ashane. The gray disk of the sun had slipped ever closer into the west when he could no longer make out the felucca's masts through the mist or hear the low humming songs of the Rashemi across the water.
Glancing once to the north, to the unseen places from which Anilya had come to Shandaular, he whispered a prayer for Thaena and then one for Rashemen.
Turning away from the lake, he made his way back to the Shield.
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The library slowly succumbed to the vremyonni s sense of organization. Minor spells had dealt with the dust and ice, sealing cracks in the windows and stone. The energy that

flowed through him was in direct opposition to the amount rest he had of yet to take advantage of. He had dealt with the body of the old vremyonni in the loft first, making sure he was laid to a proper rest.

Bastun repaired the bed and the desk nearby and took an old chair from one of the guard posts. He found candles there, too, and an old lantern and some torches to light his way as night fell over the city. He found he could not sit still until all was in order, everything in place as he imagined it should be.

He kept the Breath at his side throughout it all, in the back of his mind working out how he might once again hide the weapon from the world—or if he should. He had not seen the spirits of the children since his return and wondered if he would need to defend himself.

Despite these concerns, he found himself blissfully alone and free. Though he looked out upon a city full of the suffering dead, stood within a fortress unwittingly cursed by good intentions, and held at his side the key to a frozen hell that had left its cold mark upon his spirit—he saw a hope in the future he could not have imagined several days ago.

He double-checked the library from top to bottom, making sure it would serve him well in the coming months of winter. Satisfied and making mental notes for improvements in the days to come, he delved furthet into the work that needed to be done. He ascended into the loft and sat down at the old, weathered desk. A large tome—the first he had collected for study—lay before him unopened, the text on its cover unreadable. He pulled back his hood with shaking hands and made to remove the first of his gloves.

The Flame glowed with a soft orange light on his ring finger. The skin of his hand was pale, more so than normal. He flexed his fingers and still refused to remove the ring, still unsure of what other purpose the ring served, though in truth he was loathe to dwell on the subject just yet.

A shadow moved on his left, and he pretended to ignore it,

careful not to frighten it away.
Taking a deep breath, he reached up and removed his mask, letting cool air wash over his face before opening his eyes and stretching his jaw. A piece of polished dark glass lay nearby,
and he picked it up hesitantly and looked at his reflection in its surface.
His skin was pale—much as he remembered himself since last seeing a real mirror. What he expected to find, however, stared at him through eyes as brilliant and white-blue as ice. He held his breath, unable to look away, unable to fathom the true depths of the sacrifice he had made. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, throbbed in the fingers holding the glass. He exhaled and breathed in, grateful to feel cold air on his throat, his lungs expanding with air. Life still flowed through him—more so than ever it seemed.
A tiny giggle drew his attention, and he lowered the glass. The smallest of the ghosts, the Magewarden's daughter, stood staring at him, smiling shyly. He smiled back, enjoying this change. She leaned forward conspiratorially, placing her small hands on the edge of the desk.
"You look like him," she whispered, still smiling and marveling at his icy eyes.
"Yes," he replied and could only imagine she meant the lost prince, Serevan, though her seeming lack of fear made him wonder at even that conclusion. "Will you help me find out why?"
She thought a moment, screwing up her translucent face in the process, squinting as only a child could, before nodding and spiriting off to find more books.